

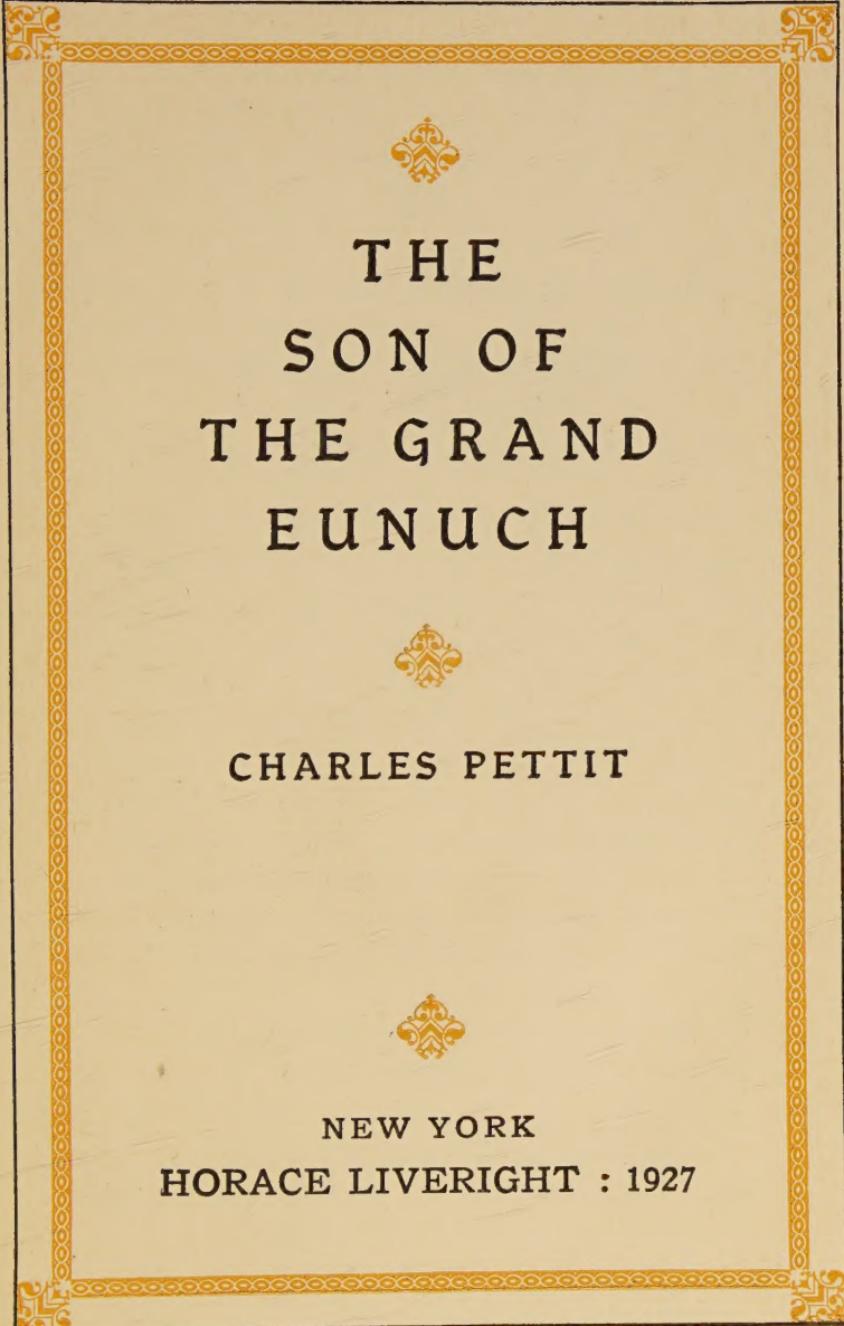




THE SON OF THE GRAND EUNUCH



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THE
SON OF
THE GRAND
EUNUCH

CHARLES PETTIT

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PREFACE

THIS novel is much less a work of the imagination than might be surmised.

The character of the Grand Eunuch belongs to history. His real name was Li Lien Yin and he was the favorite of the celebrated Dowager Empress Tsen Hi.

During nearly half a century he dominated China by his mysterious powers and he played a particularly important part in 1900, at the time of the Boxer Risings and the siege of the Legations.

The populace bestowed on this singular individual the nickname of "Pi Siao Li."

The patronymic being Li I have merely adopted an inversion; hence: Li Pi Siao.

His son Li Pi Tchou is an imaginary personage, but by no means an incredible one when we consider that these eunuchs form a special clan and that many of them make sure of posterity prior to undergoing castration.

Finally I have done my utmost to depict with the greatest exactitude the character, morals and customs of Ancient China.

The revolution of 1912 has obviously modified some exterior details, and the Imperial Court no longer exists.

Preface

It is therefore needful to go back some thirty years in order to realize the exact epoch of this novel.

My prolonged visits to China have enabled me to achieve a certain accuracy in its details. Its philosophy is equally Chinese—very Chinese indeed!

CHARLES PETTIT.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE setting sun reddened the high walls of Peking and in the center of the numerous ramparts of the Forbidden City which occupies the heart of the Capital, the horns of the pagodas of the Violet Town were sharply outlined against a glowing sky.

Within this sacred refuge there remained, once twilight had fallen—sole authorized male—His Majesty the Holy Man, Son of Heaven, surrounded by his noble spouse and his eighty and one concubines. Nine times nine, mystical and imperial number! Reverence to this! . . .

Innumerable slaves of every description, masseuses, pedicures, singers or cooks attached to the household of these ladies completed the female flock over which, at the head of twelve cohorts of neuters, His Excellency the Grand Eunuch, Li Pi Siao, mandarin of the first degree and bearer of a name evocative of such feline harmonies, held dignified sway.

On this particular evening, as was indeed his custom, the Grand Eunuch was preening himself in his

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handsome robes of office. By the light of the setting sun, the green dragons with scarlet maws, leering from his long yellow gown assumed a fearsome vitality.

The long sleeves of his robe flapped like ghostly wings in the evening breeze! Within their voluminous folds, like spiders in their lairs, appeared the restless hands, the length of the lean fingers almost doubled by nails of extraordinary dimensions, enclosed in pointed sheaths. A green jade ring worn on the left thumb suggested a great scarab held captive by one of the spiders.

None the less Li Pi Siao wore with dignity his official headdress, square in shape but surmounted by a species of folded peak of black satin.

Two wide ribbons hung from this headdress to the shoulders, ending in two scarlet pompons at the level of the clavicles.

On the back of His Excellency, slightly bowed as is seemly in a distinguished functionary, swayed his long pigtail tapering to its completion in a fine tassel of black silk.

Discreetly oiled, this pigtail stencilled a dark and greasy trail upon the yellow silk robe, without however detracting in any way from the elegance of the costume.

In any case, His Excellency Li Pi Siao bore in his entire person a great air of distinction.

His head swayed gracefully upon his heron-like

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neck and his face, hairless and wrinkled, resembled that of a highly respectable old lady.

A sallow fleshiness weighed down with dignity his flabby cheeks on either side of his pointed chin and between his narrow lids the brilliant glance of two little oblique black eyes like squashed fleas seemed constantly prying into every corner.

To demonstrate his high education Li Pi Siao invariably wore upon the little mound which served him in place of a nose enormous tortoiseshell spectacles such as are affected by all self-respecting scholars, but these were always removed, as decreed by court ritual, the moment he found himself in the presence of His Majesty the Holy Man, Son of Heaven.

Finally, in testimony of the legitimacy of his functions, he brandished with elegance an extremely handsome fly-whisk, official attribute of his honorable situation!

Verily Li Pi Siao was the most deserving and the most estimable of Grand Eunuchs that any one could desire. He was moreover of a fine intelligence, crafty of spirit and vengeful of heart. To all these merits he added the elegance of ability to appreciate a well-garnished official table.

The fact is that, deprived of all other gratification, the Grand Eunuch, Li Pi Siao, was prodigiously greedy—a proclivity which had earned him a corpulence of paunch which offered a singular contrast to

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the falsetto modulations of his shrill and strident voice.

The said paunch was unquestionably a disfigurement, but the Holy Man found excuse for the slight deformity in the reflection that the bonzes peopling his Empire were all quite as obese as his Grand Eunuch, which did not deter them from edifying his subjects by the example of their virtue, and thereby contributing to the peace and honor of his reign.

The Holy Man moreover nourished a secret sympathy for those who, following the example of the sacred Buddhas, observed the admirable practice of pious contemplation of the umbilicus! The cult of the belly as an ethic appeared to him perfectly natural.

He therefore retained a predilection for such celibates as displayed the good sense of preferring gluttony to love and thereby assured the quietude of his Empire.

Personally, the Holy Man would gladly have sacrificed his eighty and one concubines and even his noble spouse to the pleasure of a good supper in lively and agreeable company, but ritual condemned him to the lonely weariness of nights spent in the insipid society of his spouse, or in that of his choice from among his eighty and one concubines.

That night, as was customary, the Holy Man, observant of the rites, quitted the gardens where he had passed long hours meditating on the profound boredom endured by a god whom the absurd piety of

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his grand priests condemns to seclusion in his shrine. He well knew that a god, in order to remain such, must abide invisible and mysterious, letting his representatives see and hear on his behalf, consult and act in his name and even voice as his, opinions to him forever unknown.

But the very thought of always remaining a species of prisoner to sacred rules and traditions filled him with a profound melancholy.

Therefore it was with weary steps that he sought his apartments, wherein he was constrained to vanish simultaneously with the setting of the sun.

In the Great Red Hall leading to the Imperial Chamber, motionless as a statue, impassive and mute, the Grand Eunuch awaited the solemn hour of retiring of the Son of Heaven.

When the Holy Man appeared, Li Pi Siao's immobility gave place to the ceremonial gestures.

He began by respectfully removing his large tortoiseshell spectacles, then, after the customary genuflexions, he indicated by a discreet gesture the Table of the Golden Dragon, whereon reposed, in perfect order, the jade tablets bearing the graven names of each of the Imperial Concubines.

Absentmindedly, at hazard, the Holy Man picked up one of these tablets and handed it in perfect silence to the Grand Eunuch; then he vanished into his chamber.

Li Pi Siao, who had prostrated himself, ventured

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to rise, and, seized with curiosity, adjusted his spectacles on the end of his nose!

The concubine, thus chosen at hazard, answered to the long and distinguished literary name of "Miss-Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring!"

Li Pi Siao, who as a practical man avoided the useless mental effort of memorizing the literary names of eighty and one concubines, drew from one of his long sleeves a worn little notebook wherein he had prosaically inscribed a number against every name.

He perceived that "The-Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring" corresponded to Number 19 in his notebook. As he was careful to insist that the concubines should always remain together in the order wherein he had catalogued them, and as these amiable damsels were lodged in groups of nine in as many different pavilions, Li Pi Siao had no trouble in locating his Number 19.

"Miss Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring," said he, bowing ceremoniously before her, "learn that the Holy Man, Son of Heaven, bestows upon your unworthy carcase the immense honor of authorizing its entry to the Magnificent Chamber of the Sacred Repose! Reverence to this! . . ."

And then, more intimately, he thought it advantageous to add words of counsel.

"I trust, Miss Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring, that you will bear in mind all the rules of correct behavior, and that your conduct towards His

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Majesty will in every way conform to the sacred ritual."

And here Li Pi Siao began to enumerate a thousand rules of the most complicated etiquette.

Above all he emphasized one most delicate point: "After the customary genuflexions, be mindful, young lady, of what you must accomplish at the Great Moment . . . His Majesty, in accordance with the rites, will be reposing in his nightrobe upon his divine couch. He will lie upon his back, his eyes fixed upon the Heavens, and will pay no attention of any kind to your despicable person . . . None the less, at the Great Moment, His Majesty will execute a ritual gesture which you will know how to interpret . . . Thereupon, you will crawl upon your belly before him until your nose achieves the honor of attaining to his sacred slippers . . . and—you will wait! . . . If, however, by an extraordinary fortune, the Holy Man should invite you to pursue yet further your groveling advance, you will respond, I trust, with all the seemliness exacted by ritual, and all the respect due to his August Person!"

Her eyes modestly downcast, Miss Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring listened attentively to the supreme counsels of the venerable Li Pi Siao, who thus concluded:

"Hasten, then, young lady, to prepare yourself—to cause the Holy Man to wait for you would be of an unthinkable impropriety, even though His Majesty

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doubtless awaits your impending visit with the most complete and haughty indifference!"

Thereupon, the servants flocked around Miss Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring, to robe, beautify and prepare her for her task.

The chosen of the night donned first of all a handsome pair of silk trousers, shot with the colors of a pigeon's breast.

At the ankles these trousers widened considerably in such a manner that each little foot resembled a pistil issuing from an immense calyx.

A voluminous jacket of apple green, falling in straight folds on all sides concealed the feminine form with praiseworthy reserve.

Her hair, oiled and glossy, was bound by a diadem of black velvet adorned with orient pearls, her ears disappearing modestly beneath strands of hair coiled in the form of shells.

On the other hand, her face was violently enlivened, it being needful that it should glow becomingly beneath the glance of the Holy Man.

Li Pi Siao, as an expert, looked on, vouchsafing occasional remarks regarding the cosmetics applied:

"Accentuate the arch of the eyebrows!" he bleated in his falsetto voice.

"More red upon the underlip! And rouge, I beg of you put plenty of rouge: her cheeks remain too yellow!—Enough—that's not so bad! . . . Now put white upon her neck . . . an avalanche of white!"

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. . . remember that your work will soon appear before the Holy Man!"

Breathless with emotion, the servants labored hastily with their little pencils and brushes upon the delicate skin of the concubine.

At length Li Pi Siao declared himself content.

He summoned a gigantic eunuch to bear the youthful beauty to the Bed Chamber of the Holy Man; since Miss Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring, in common, be it said, with all the other concubines, could not aspire to walking very far. Her little feet, broken in infancy, according to custom, sustained with difficulty the weight of her body.

Barely was she able to achieve a few tottering steps. To effect even so much it was necessary to extend her arms on either side in order to preserve her balance—a movement which lent a touching grace to her progress.

For the transit, Miss Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring was therefore dependent on the services of the eunuch bearer.

This devoted servant placed himself in such manner as to enable her to kneel upon one of his broad shoulders, then, steadying her with a mighty hand, he rose with his elegant burden and prepared to follow the Grand Eunuch towards the pavilion wherein reposed His Majesty the Holy Man, Son of Heaven.

CHAPTER TWO

HAVING, with due observance of the customary ceremonial, introduced Miss Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring into the Chamber of the Imperial Repose, the Grand Eunuch felt himself relieved of his chief anxiety.

Thanks to ritual, the Holy Man was debarred until dawn from leaving his bedchamber, wherein there remained to him the solace of observing how admirably stippled was the countenance of Number 19.

Li Pi Siao therefore enjoyed the incontestable lordship of the Violet Town, there being none able to thwart his caprices or desires.

For the repose of his conscience he made a last round of inspection. He ascertained that a guard of honor of his eunuchs kept watch at the gates of the Empress's pavilion.

Her Majesty was snoring potently as becomes a sovereign and her rhythmic rumbling agreeably vibrated the paper windows of her chamber.

Reassured as to the well-being of this august personage, Li Pi Siao pursued his nocturnal perambulations. He bestowed a hasty glance on the pavilions where reposed the eighty and one concubines. Here also the eunuchs watched, and amid their innocent

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slumbers these gentle damsels uttered long sighs and little gentle protests.

To these Li Pi Siao lent but brief attention, being resolved upon completing his rounds by a rapid circuit of the walls of the Violet Town. Upon the ramparts, cloaked in darkness, each at his post, lurked the faithful eunuchs, sword and dagger in hand.

Then Li Pi Siao, his mind at rest, bent his steps towards his own magnificent pavilion, in close proximity to the Imperial Abode.

The night was fine and clear, the stars shimmered in a cloudless sky, and the moon's rays woke an opalescent sheen in the eyes of the bronze lions crouching at the entrance to the Grand Eunuch's pavilion.

Far away, in the shadows of the imperial gardens the nightingales sang melodiously; intoxicating scents floated on the warm air, tender and entrancing emotions breathed from this night of spring. It was the perfect hour! . . .

Li Pi Siao was of a poetical turn of mind, despite the fact that his thoughts were more often than not absorbed in the search for a dish gratifying to his greed. And as the moon struck him on this occasion as being really beautiful, comparable to a succulent pumpkin, he paused a moment upon his threshold to address her in sentimental verse.

Suddenly he started. An amorous tomcat, slinking in the shadows, called to its well-beloved. The prolonged wails, so unpleasantly evocative of the

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harmonies of his own name, struck Li Pi Siao as both derisive and objectionable.

He cursed the feline, crying:

“Learn, impure animal, that within these walls the Holy Man alone has license or power to love.”

At Li Pi Siao’s call eunuchs leapt from the shadows, sword in hand and at his command vainly pursued the beast which bounded lightly away.

Pacified, Li Pi Siao resumed his sonnet to the moon.

Then he quite naturally recollected his stomach, and summoning the small eunuchs who served him as scullions, he desired them to inform him whether the feast he promised himself was cooked to a turn.

During the day certain high mandarins and great dignitaries had applied at the Palace for the privilege of an Imperial Audience, and had diplomatically preceded their petition by an embassy of gifts addressed to that Grand Master of Ceremonies, Li Pi Siao.

As the gluttony of the Grand Eunuch was known throughout the Celestial Empire, the supplicants, displaying a solicitude as tactful as it was diplomatic, had sent him huge dishes loaded with viands as rare as they were esteemed.

And Li Pi Siao rejoiced in anticipation at the thought of the delectable night he was to pass in the absorbing of these dainties.

When, therefore, the little scullions informed him that supper was ready, Li Pi Siao felt deeply moved.

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Inhaling with gentle emotion the odor of the succulent viands, he entered his home, there to enjoy a lengthy feast, in the company of other geldings known and appreciated by him for their gifts of humor and good fellowship.

He had long realized with judicial wisdom that the joys of gluttony are augmented when they are shared with initiates and that amiable conversation is a pleasant stimulus to appetite.

His only stipulation was that conversation at his table should remain of so bright and trivial a nature as should obviate any risk of distracting his mind from a minute appreciation of the viands.

A smile upon his lips, Li Pi Siao welcomed his guests with great cordiality; they, on their part, openly purred with pleasure at sight of the well-garnished table. At Li Pi Siao's invitation the neuters seated themselves comfortably in fine ebony chairs inlaid with mother-of-pearl, then, seizing their ivory chopsticks they set to work, fishing here and there for titbits among the saucers which contained a hundred hors-d'œuvre.

Li Pi Siao, with truly epicurean restraint, limited himself to one simple appetizer, absorbing slowly and methodically an admirable jelly composed of rotten eggs.

He inhaled its odor while admiring the dusky hue of this rare delicacy. From time to time he smacked his tongue against his palate, in the manner affected

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by the pale-face Barbarians when sampling a vintage wine.

"This jelly is of an exquisite flavor!" declared Li Pi Siao with a certain gravity, for the topic was a weighty one.

And he added:

"The eggs of which it is composed must have rotted for at least ten years . . . a truly admirable dish!"

Then, aside, to the chief of the eighth cohort, destined on the morrow to guard the Eastern Gate:

"You will permit the Taotai of Chang Sha to enter the Violet Town, should he present himself, since it is he who has so well chosen these eggs on my behalf."

The chief of the eighth cohort bowed in token of obedience. Thereupon Li Pi Siao immersed himself in the enjoyment of a puree of sharks' fins surmounted by a magnificent sea caterpillar with black and sticky whiskers.

"An elegantly arranged dish!" said he, smiling with satisfaction, and he had further commendation for some swallows' nests floating in a yellowish sauce flavored with rare spices.

"Such exoticism shows real taste! Long live Annam, my friends!"

A more banal confection of shrimps preserved in rancid oil passed without comment.

Poached doves' eggs on bamboo hearts revived his smile, however, and a skewer of pressed ducks lac-

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quered by cooking in a special fat met with approval.

A hundred other viands passed before his eyes.

At the dictates of fancy, Li Pi Siao trifled with one, lingered over another or disdainfully rejected a third.

With a view to assisting digestion and brightening the repast, Li Pi Siao had posted in a corner of the apartment a dozen little eunuch musicians who drew from their flutes brisk and lively tunes, well adapted to excite the appetite.

Absorbed and silent the guests had at first confined themselves to a scholarly appreciation of those delectable dishes recommended by their kindly Lord. They lent a respectful ear to his counsels on cookery, admiring both his learning and his delicate tact.

His knowing observations were hailed by appreciative chuckles and in token of their gratitude the guests gave vent to those post-prandial eructations which the Occidental Barbarian has so thoughtlessly condemned as unseemly, whereas in China they are regarded as evidence of the most refined politeness.

Thereafter, stuffed and satiated, their stomachs distended nigh to bursting, all these amiable capons experienced a desire to exchange confidences regarding their epicurean orgy.

Li Pi Siao opened the discussion in a humorous vein, addressing his words to his stomach, as to a tried friend:

“Well, now, rascal, are you content? . . . Have I

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not given proof of the esteem in which I hold you! . . . With what tenderness have I nurtured you! . . . Yet are you not, after all, my trustiest comrade! . . . I live for you alone and my devotion to you is truly touching! . . .”

With the slight puerility common to their kind the other eunuchs were much diverted at the wit of Li Pi Siao.

Drumming with their podgy hands upon their paunches, they raised their falsetto voices in an affecting chorus, crying:

“These are indeed our truest friends, how wise is His Excellency Li Pi Siao!”

Their shrill and strident laughter rang out in rippling cadences of the most perfect discord.

Nevertheless one of the diners retained a rather melancholy aspect.

Amiably, Li Pi Siao inquired:

“Are you indisposed? . . . or are you dissatisfied with the flavor of the viands? . . .”

But the guest replied slowly in bitter tones:

“The feast is exquisite, but my mind dwells upon joys that are now denied me!”

The other eunuchs regarded him with amazement. Was it conceivable that this malapert should voice so misplaced a regret?

Li Pi Siao drew himself up majestically, pointing at the simpleton with a derisive finger:

“The gentleman doubtless desires that we should

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speak of that which he lacks. . . . He shall have his wish! . . .”

And he continued as follows:

“My dear friends, I am well aware that the populace of Peking affects to despise us, bestowing upon us the vulgar nickname of ‘Lao koun.’* These humble and ill-bred folk, who would risk their necks to gather up even the crumbs of our recent banquet, pretend a great arrogance at having retained, for the propagation of their ignoble kind, that which we have so disdainfully sacrificed in order to become honorable functionaries. . . . Now, I conscientiously affirm that nearly all these brigands would gladly exchange their lot for ours, were they able. Their stupid and malicious sarcasm is born of the lowest envy. . . . And the mediocre compensations afforded them by their foolish females in no wise prevent their sighing after the luxuries of a well-furnished table. . . . Believe me, my dear friend, these jaundiced critics, given the opportunity, would not hesitate to succeed us; since love has never yet filled an empty belly!”

Then, addressing the melancholy young eunuch:

“Have you understood, young sir?”

But insensible to the influence of such fine and learned oratory, the young eunuch continued to lament in piteous tones:

“Ah! women . . . women! . . .”

The fumes of the roseate liquor of the Academicians with which Li Pi Siao had supplied him all too

* Impotent old Roosters.

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abundantly, were doubtless rising to his head and engendering these bizarre images.

Contemptuously, the Grand Eunuch resumed:

"It is obvious that the senses of this unfortunate are obscured by the fumes of liquor. . . . I am perhaps somewhat to blame, I admit it and desire to show every indulgence . . . but verily this comrade has a melancholy intoxication, that he must endlessly repeat: 'Ah! . . . women . . . women! . . .'"

Then, crossing his arms indignantly:

"What sparkling wit! . . . Especially in such pleasant society! . . ."

But the young eunuch pursued his train of thought with drunken obstinacy.

Infuriated, the Grand Eunuch cried:

"You shall no longer be chief of a cohort . . . I banish you from the Violet Town . . . I exile you! Henceforth you shall go herd the swine of His Majesty the Holy Man at the uttermost ends of the province."

With stately gesture he waved the malcontent to the little door leading to the kitchens.

Bowing his head, the melancholy young eunuch rose from the table and retired, followed by the scornful glances of the diners whose digestion he had dared to compromise by his misplaced lamentations.

Resuming his imperturbability, Li Pi Siao remarked:

"At this moment His Majesty the Holy Man doubtless contemplates with utter disdain my Number 19!"

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. . . May His August example reassure our spirits
regarding all that concerns the pleasures of love!"

Then, addressing the small musician eunuchs:
"Give us your gayest and most lively music . . .
We require stimulation to renew our appetites!"

CHAPTER THREE

AT dawn, Li Pi Siao, according to custom, presented himself at the doors of the Imperial Chamber.

Beneath his arm he bore with dignity a large official register wherein tradition demanded that he dutifully inscribe the nocturnal acts of the Holy Man.

This record would serve for the edification of posterity and incidentally in some degree to establish the claims of resultant bastards.

On perceiving Li Pi Siao the Holy Man repressed a yawn of boredom and with a gesture full of majesty, traced with his finger, in the air, the characters equivalent to the word: "*Nil!*"

Without emotion, against the date of the eighth day of the seventh year of His Majesty's reign, the Grand Eunuch inscribed the characters thus indicated.

In the meantime, the eunuch bearer, who had accompanied Li Pi Siao, had borne away upon his shoulder Miss Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring. To this lady, His Majesty had graciously granted permission to spend the night crouched upon a tiny stool at the foot of His divine couch, so soon as she had accomplished the ritual crawl to the toes of his Sacred Slippers.

When she had vanished, the Holy Man, finding himself alone with Li Pi Siao, deigned to remark:

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"A distant sound of flutes reached my ears last evening . . . you supped agreeably, Li Pi Siao!"

The Grand Eunuch, appalled, ground his nose into the earth, and commenced to excuse himself with touching humility for having, albeit unknowingly, troubled the amorous transports of His Majesty.

But the Holy Man reassured him with an indulgent gesture:

"On the contrary, Li Pi Siao, you diverted me! . . . I am not displeased! . . . I know how egregiously gluttonous you are; but 'tis an amiable vice!"

And the Holy Man, constrained by ritual, after a lamentable night of love, to go fasting at daybreak and preside at the Grand Council in the Throne Room, uttered a gentle sigh of envy.

He added regretfully:

"I, alas, am condemned to the celestial joys of love . . . for the edification of my faithful subjects I am credited with all potencies . . . Alas! the pity of it!"

And the Holy Man smiled a bitter smile.

Li Pi Siao lent a deferential ear to His Majesty's lamentations—indeed, he pitied him sincerely.

The Holy Man continued:

"And when, after presiding at that deadly Grand Council, it will be conceded me to refresh myself and seek distraction . . . where can I hope to find it? Once only in a year am I permitted to leave the Violet Town in order to offer sacrifice at the Temple of Heaven; even then, am I not closed in the darkness

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of a stuffy palanquin from which I can see nothing of the outside world. Moreover, are not streets and windows deserted at my passing? In reverence for my grandeur, I admit, but the tribute in no wise moves me . . . And but for that annual day of sacrifice I am reduced to philosophizing alone in my garden: a meager diversion! . . .”

Familiarly, the Holy Man deigned to inquire:

“Have you no suggestions to offer, Li Pi Siao?”

And forgetful of his rank, he awaited an answer with all the impatience of a schoolboy hoping for a spree.

Li Pi Siao meditated a reply that would minister equally to his personal interests and to His Majesty’s amusement. Finally he announced:

“If Your Majesty would permit me, I could, as on many former occasions, disguise myself and slip out of the Violet Town. I would visit the principal shops of Peking and should be certain to find some rare or peculiar object that would interest Your Majesty!”

The Holy Man had long appreciated the services of Li Pi Siao, who performed most dexterously the errands destined to lighten his Imperial boredom. He inquired with all the eagerness of the poor recluse that he was despite his Omnipotence:

“What novelty will you bring me, Li Pi Siao?”

The Grand Eunuch replied without hesitation:

“If Your Majesty approves the choice I will purchase a musical alarm-clock . . . an invention due

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to the diabolical ingenuity of the Occidental Barbarians . . . it will play several different airs at choice. . . . Your Majesty will be wakened by a fanfare, a dirge or a serenade, or in any other musical manner that you may elect! . . . ”

The Holy Man’s eyes were big with amazement:

“And you really believe that such a machine exists? . . . ”

“Undoubtedly!” affirmed Li Pi Siao; “but to discover it may require long hours of seeking.”

“What matter that,” exclaimed the Holy Man enthusiastically, “you can have leave for the entire day; I give you my most cordial permission!”

And with a noble gesture he handed Li Pi Siao an ingot of gold for the purchase of the marvelous clock.

Li Pi Siao bowed and took leave of His Majesty. He was enchanted at receiving a day’s leave, which he could employ in visiting the country house, which he had purchased on the outskirts of Peking with the proceeds of various little Imperial errands.

The purchase of the musical alarm-clock would occupy but a few moments. He knew beforehand where to seek it, having remarked one, during a previous outing, in the window of a large foreign shop kept by a half-breed. The price thereof was clearly marked in Barbarian numerals: 39 francs and 95 centimes.

But Li Pi Siao had caused it to be translated into Chinese figures and had ascertained with satisfaction

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that the clock was obtainable for at most a third of a gold tael.

And since His Majesty's ingot weighed at least a hundred taels the transaction would not be without profit.

Highly delighted, Li Pi Siao summoned for his expedition one of those conveyances commonly employed by the rich merchants when driving in the streets of Peking.

The vehicle had two very high wheels of yellow wood surmounted by a large blue linen hood beneath which the passenger found shelter alike from the sun and from the indiscreet eyes of passersby.

On the box sat a highly correct coachman, his long pigtail hanging below his blue blouse, his head crowned by a coquettish little cap of black silk topped by a crimson pompom.

Conscious of his importance he gravely held the reins of a sleek and magnificent mule which pranced between the shafts.

Li Pi Siao had moreover faked and disguised himself to the best of his ability; indeed he excelled at such masquerades. His position frequently imposed them upon him, since it was customary that he should always inspect any supplicants or functionaries who, during the daytime, obtained admission to the Violet Town.

Disguised as a humble gardener, as a begging monk or sometimes as a mandarin of high rank, he mingled

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with every class of visitor, his presence utterly unsuspected.

As Grand Eunuch, he remained as invisible and as mysterious as his Divine Master, the Son of Heaven himself, and none save the eunuchs and the concubines could boast a knowledge of his undisguised features.

He was none the less perpetually on the alert, untiringly spying on every gesture and noting every conversation.

His occult power was thereby considerably augmented.

By means of the secret information so skilfully obtained, he inspired among the highest mandarins a species of superstitious terror, being credited by them with the gift of divination.

Nor was their fear of him misplaced.

Many a privilege had been withdrawn, many a great mandarin degraded and exiled; many heads even had fallen in consequence of the reports made by the Grand Eunuch to the members of the Grand Council.

For his visit to the city on this occasion, Li Pi Siao had simply disguised himself as a venerable merchant.

He had donned dignified and prosperous garments and had faked his smooth face with the aid of false eyebrows, white mustaches and a snowy imperial. A few strokes of a skilful brush accentuated his wrinkles and transformed his features.

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The coachman himself was ignorant of the identity of the person he was commanded to drive. A matter of no importance to him in any case provided he was well paid.

Crouched beneath the blue hood of his chariot, Li Pi Siao passed out of the great East Gate unrecognized even by the eunuch guard.

Once outside the walls of the Violet Town he heaved a sigh of relief and pleasure.

His secluded existence sometimes weighed upon him and it was to him a great recreation to wander incognito through the streets of Peking.

His peregrinations also afforded occasional opportunity for a new and fruitful espionage which augmented his reputation for sorcery and likewise his finances, since he exacted a high price from those who sought to buy his silence.

Meantime, Li Pi Siao's equipage, mingling with other conveyances, followed one of the wide and important thoroughfares which traverse the Tartar Town from west to east.

Clouds of unsavory dust, rising from the ground, obscured the majesty of the city.

Holding a perfume vial to his nostrils, Li Pi Siao deplored the ill-kept condition of the Tartar quarter.

Meanwhile, he plotted vengeance on the mandarins charged with its maintenance, vowing to subject them to heavy fines, of which, moreover, he would himself retain the greater part.

From the summit of the coal mountain situated in

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the center of the park of the Forbidden City, the immense town of Peking doubtless offered an enchanting spectacle to the eyes of the Holy Man. He could picture it as a forest of green oak trees of which the majestic branches sheltered the princely Yamens, the temples and pagodas, intersected at right angles by the broad avenues which completed and perfected its harmony. His Majesty could pride himself upon the possession of so fair a capital.

But behold at close quarters what repulsive filth in its details.

What neglect of public services! What disorder!
What a stench!

Li Pi Siao felt a personal affliction since he considered himself in some degree its sovereign.

However, his carriage had plunged beneath the monumental arch of the Rha Ta Men Gate, the great exit from the Tartar Town, giving upon the immense avenue which led to the Temple of Heaven by way of the Chinese City.

The high walls of the Tartar Quarter, themselves wide as boulevards, were divided at this point and formed an imposing circle, a kind of gigantic bastion of which the exterior face was surmounted by outposts with arched and overhanging roofs.

Within this advance barrier was a seething mob of two-wheeled vehicles drawn by mules, mingling with hand carts and with the humbler pedestrians seeking the Chinese City.

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Long convoys of camels, heavily laden, augmented the confusion.

Li Pi Siao admired this human anthill, and reflected that the capital of an empire of five hundred million inhabitants was a truly grand thing to behold.

And at the thought that he himself was in some sort the most powerful individual in the said empire he was filled with a great arrogance.

Without any doubt, the satisfaction thus afforded to his pride was in itself alone well worth the sacrifice he had made of his virility.

And reflecting also upon the enormous advantages redounding to him from his privileged situation, Li Pi Siao marveled that any Chinaman could, even from the cradle, aspire to a position other than that of Grand Eunuch!

His conveyance was now threading its way with difficulty among the tortuous alleys of the Chinese City, the ramparts of which formed a square enclosing those of the Tartar Town, geometrical defenses of a capital that had been well designed! . . .

Whereas the high officials, mandarins of all degrees, magistrates and great scholars, abode in dignity on the borders of the Forbidden City in the Tartar Town, the Chinese quarter was entirely peopled by merchants.

Their signboards, inscribed with large golden characters, swung above the swarming crowds of pedestrians in the narrow lanes.

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Li Pi Siao very soon perceived that of the European shop which he sought.

He stopped his carriage, descended, and entered the shop.

It was crowded with busy customers who, awaiting their turn to be served, chattered gayly among themselves, exchanging amid much laughter the gossip of the Tartar Town.

Mocking, they jeered openly at the Imperial administration and its complicated bureaucracy.

Li Pi Siao was deeply displeased, and his consternation augmented when the conversation attacked the subject of his own person.

The low fellows pretended to imitate the "Lao koun" of the Violet Town and surpassed each other in the improvisation of grotesque dialogue attributed to the chief of these "Lao koun," Li Pi Siao.

The Grand Eunuch conquered a momentary impulse to reveal his identity; wisely he limited himself to ascertaining the names of the chief offenders. These names he would remember to place at the head of the daily list for decapitation which he delivered punctually every morning to the Grand Executioner.

Having recovered his peace of mind with the reflection that vengeance would not long be delayed, he quietly accomplished the purchase of the coveted musical alarm-clock.

His errand completed, Li Pi Siao resolved to employ his liberty in visiting the handsome property which he possessed in the suburbs of Peking.

CHAPTER FOUR

LI PI SIAO was attached to his country house, chiefly because it afforded him an agreeable reminder of the extortions committed in order to obtain it.

Nevertheless, it did not harbor that which he valued most.

Ever fearful of an always possible robbery, he concealed his most treasured possession within the sacred precincts of the Violet Town. The said possession consisted of an exquisite little vessel of finest porcelain wherein was carefully preserved in rice-spirit that which the Grand Eunuch had been compelled to sacrifice in order to enter the service of the Holy Man.

Moreover, this treasure was further enclosed in the coffin which awaited the remainder of Li Pi Siao's person, and the coffin itself, according to Chinese custom, occupied the place of honor in the Grand Eunuch's official residence.

From the human standpoint, as well as the religious, it was essential that the Grand Eunuch should regain his entirety after death. Otherwise he would be bereft of all dignity and would become the butt of the spirits of his ancestors.

The vessel was therefore considered of supreme importance and was watched day and night by a spe-

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cial guard of eunuchs who redoubled their vigilance upon those occasions when their kind lord was absent.

In the country Li Pi Siao kept only his family and these, moreover, without any guard, notwithstanding that he viewed them with a modicum of affection. This affection, however, was not untinged by self-interest, since he counted upon his two sons to accord him, after his death, the Ancestor Worship due to a parent.

It should be explained that these sons were not, as might be assumed by those of limited intelligence, the outcome of a miracle, but the perfectly natural product of Li Pi Siao and his legitimate spouse in those bygone years when he had not yet aspired to the office of Grand Eunuch.

Notwithstanding a measure of enjoyment formerly afforded him by his spouse, Li Pi Siao felt no regret in the contemplation of this union of long ago.

A poor scholar, ceaselessly humbled by the mandarins and harassed by the problem of subsistence, he had been wont to deplore the mediocrity of his state and above all of his table, being even then of a gluttonous habit.

Fortunately for him, a relation of his, the late Grand Eunuch Siao Ngan Eul,* had by the exertion

* Li Pi Siao's predecessor was named Ngan Te Hai and was nicknamed Siao Ngan Eul. He was assassinated at Tientsin in 1864 by order of the Empress of the East, Tsen Ngan. He was the favorite of the Empress of the West, Twen Hi, and had been despatched by her on a mission to buy her gowns. His murder occasioned a lifelong feud between the two Empresses.

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of unscrupulous nepotism extricated him from his difficulties.

After the necessary little operation—undergone, be it said, by Li Pi Siao with the utmost good grace—the late Grand Eunuch had obtained the admission of his young cousin to the Violet Town, attaching him to the personal service of the Holy Man. He had little difficulty in persuading His Majesty, already a firm believer in dynastic succession, that great advantage would result from confirming the office of Grand Eunuch in a family of well established loyalty.

In the natural course of events therefore, Li Pi Siao succeeded his kindly relation the late Grand Eunuch whose memory he duly honored by the observance of the most fervent Ancestral rites.

In order to receive a similar worship after his own demise, Li Pi Siao earnestly desired that his eldest son should owe him a similar gratitude and was scheming to bequeath to him an office now become almost hereditary.

Since, therefore, the day was particularly fortunate and propitious for the announcement of good tidings, Li Pi Siao had decided graciously to inform his eldest son Li Pi Tchou of the benevolent project that would both recompense his virtuous conduct and confirm him in his filial piety.

He did not doubt that the excellent young man would be moved to tears while seeking adequate expression for his passionate gratitude.

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What reasonable objection could Li Pi Tchou offer to the acceptance of such a favor?

Obviously, in the interests of modesty and manners, this good son might commence by declaring himself unworthy of so high an honor; but Li Pi Siao was magnanimously prepared to oppose such humility.

The Holy Man, when approached in the matter, had lent a gracious ear to the laudable aspirations of his Grand Eunuch, and enchanted by the prospect of possessing a beautiful foreign alarm-clock, he had bestowed upon Li Pi Siao in addition to the ingot of gold for its purchase an admirable little vessel destined for his future successor, a delicate assurance this, that his petition on behalf of his son was definitely approved . . .

Li Pi Siao was therefore exceedingly joyful as he descended from his two-wheeled chariot in the vicinity of his handsome country house.

Desirous of retaining his incognito, he dismissed the fat coachman with a generous tip and hastened with rapid little steps up the zigzag path which led through the rice-fields to his family seat.

Beneath his arm he bore the musical alarm-clock purchased for the Holy Man and likewise the little vessel bestowed upon him by the Imperial generosity.

It was in this wise that he entered unannounced into the reception hall of his country home and laid upon a table these two precious articles. He remarked with satisfaction that his house had remained

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in good order and that the women had fled, as was seemly, at the approach of a stranger, concealing themselves in their apartments.

Li Pi Siao was moreover so well disguised that even his sons did not at first know him. It was not until he had uttered several mews of affection that they recognized the musical accents of their venerable sire.

Whereupon, humbly kneeling, they offered him the homage exacted by the ritual of Filial Piety.

Having kindly invited them to rise, Li Pi Siao drew aside his elder son, Li Pi Tchou, and addressed him with some emotion:

"You are well aware, my son, that you are the object of my warmest paternal affection! I am grateful to you for your filial piety and I hope and believe that after my death you will not neglect to accord me due Ancestral rites . . . In order, therefore, to recompense your merits and virtues, I am resolved to accord you to-day the most profound joy that you may ever hope to attain!"

And while his son, deeply touched, gazed at him in anticipatory gratitude, Li Pi Siao announced in measured and solemn accents:

"The Holy Man, Son of Heaven, in his immense benevolence, has been moved to decree that the unworthy Li Pi Tchou shall in due course succeed his father Li Pi Siao in the proud and honorable office of Grand Eunuch. Reverence to this! . . ."

Observing that his good son, struck dumb by the news, remained open-mouthed and foolish, staring be-

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fore him with vague unseeing eyes, Li Pi Siao adjured him with wise authority:

"Hasten then, my son, to prostrate yourself in order to render thanks to His Majesty the Holy Man, Son of Heaven!"

Obediently, Li Pi Tchou flung himself down and groveled face to the earth, while his venerable father extended a long sleeve in paternal benediction over his prostrate form.

Having thus demonstrated his profound respect for the Imperial word, Li Pi Tchou however raised himself slowly and, as Li Pi Siao had expected, began to protest:

"I am infinitely grateful for all your kindness, oh, my magnanimous father; I am also overwhelmed at the thought that the Holy Man has deigned to nominate me as the ultimate successor to your admirable office. But am I not, alas, a humble creature, utterly unworthy of such honors and incapable of sustaining their weight!"

Li Pi Siao checked him with condescension:

"You express yourself, my son, in accordance with the dictates of the highest politeness. But I authorize you, upon this exceptional occasion, to abrogate them and to declare to me without delay and in all sincerity the joy that you must experience at so notable an event! . . ."

Smiling, he awaited the manifestation of his good son's joyful affection.

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But to his immense surprise Li Pi Tchou maintained an expression of sadness and reserve.

Li Pi Siao inquired paternally:

"Have you perhaps not fully understood?"

And Li Pi Tchou replied with a sigh:

"Indeed, yes, my father, I have understood only too well! . . ."

More and more astonished, the Grand Eunuch exclaimed:

"And you do not bound and leap with a proud and lawful delight? Are you then ignorant of the immense honor that will fall to you in succeeding me and of the power that you will acquire! . . . That the comfort of your old age will be secured to you in an honorable office! . . . You are offered the certainty of inhabiting an official residence, of donning every morning a magnificent uniform; you will be at liberty, should you so desire, to intervene in the affairs of government, to probe all state secrets, and to benefit those who court your favor or decapitate any who incur your displeasure! . . . Finally you are offered the opportunity of having the best furnished table in the Celestial Empire, without enumerating a thousand other little advantages such as the honor of approaching the Holy Man in his intimacy! . . . Yet before the prospect of so brilliant a future you hesitate to express your gratitude to the tender father to whom you owe your good fortune? . . . Do you then know nothing of life?"

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Humbly, Li Pi Tchou listened to his father's eloquence. Then he murmured:

"Alas, my father! I love my wife Chti! . . ."

The Grand Eunuch shrugged his shoulders.

"What poverty of spirit! . . . You speak to me of trifles when we are discussing great events! . . . Is it possible that you can be so foolish? . . . Moreover, has any one forbidden you to retain the warmest affection for your wife, Chti?"

He added, patiently:

"Nor do I oppose it! Chti is a worthy woman whom I esteem for having given you a son who will in the future accord due respect to your memory—and to mine—I see no objection to her reposing, after her death, in a handsome coffin among those of our family. . . . I have already, as you know, conferred a like honor upon your mother, in recompense for having borne me two sons. . . . Chti can therefore be completely reassured as regards her future! . . . As for her present, she will remain surrounded by every comfort that she can desire in this beautiful country home where she will enjoy a peaceful and respected existence in a modest retreat such as seemliness decrees. You may thus judge for yourself, my son, that I am not unmindful of your affection for Chti! . . . What have you now to say?"

And the Grand Eunuch crossed his arms with dignity.

But Li Pi Tchou, unconvinced by the remarkable eloquence of his venerable father, began to wail.

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"I desire to confess freely to you, my father. I do not merely love Chti with the affection which you suppose. I also love her with a profound adoration, with all my soul and with all my body! . . . For one kiss of her lips I would gladly give all the joys of this earth and I would sacrifice my very life to win from her a smile! . . . Ah! my father, Chti is so lovely, so lovable and so loving! . . . so . . ."

But he was unable to proceed with the enumeration of his wife's charms, for his venerable father interrupted him angrily:

"Will you have done and cease to grieve me by these distressing effusions? . . . Do you mock me? . . . Or are you mentally deficient? . . . Do you then dare to love your wife in the unseemly and foolish manner of the pale-face Barbarians? . . . Is it possible that you can dishonor yourself to such a degree? . . ."

Appalled, Li Pi Tchou had no excuse to offer save to murmur almost inaudibly:

"Chti loves me also!"

At this pitiable declaration the anger of the Grand Eunuch was transmuted into an immense disdain for the shameless candor displayed by his elder son, and he exclaimed in withering tones:

"Chti loves you, you say? And that appears to you quite natural? And you actually believe that your vile little carcase is an object of adoration to that deplorable creature! . . . And that in order to render you a physical devotion she would sacrifice her

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vanity, her well-being, her reputation or even her comfort? . . . I admire you for retaining any such illusions! . . . The Holy Man himself does not possess them! . . .”

And bursting into shrill laughter he repeated in his falsetto tones:

“At your age! . . . At over forty years old! . . . To aspire to being loved for oneself! . . .”

Then, in more fatherly accents:

“Believe me, I was not quite as old as you when, for excellent reasons, I definitely renounced love . . . and yet, I knew by then that I no longer had much to sacrifice. . . . I was neither fool enough nor vain enough to mistake my autumn for spring! . . .”

But Li Pi Tchou, being a true lover, was insensible to the wiser voice of reason and repeated piteously:

“Chti loves me, I am sure of it!”

At this the Grand Eunuch shrugged his shoulders:

“Like most women, Chti is not without a certain amount of imagination! . . . In any case, I am about to question her myself. Pray summon her!”

Much moved, Li Pi Tchou, in filial obedience, went to seek Chti his wife, who had remained modestly concealed from all eyes, within her own apartments.

CHAPTER FIVE

CHTI appeared, trembling, upon the threshold of the chamber; she immediately prostrated herself in honor of her venerable father-in-law, but so perturbed was she that she completely lost her way in the labyrinth of genuflexions and grimaces exacted by even the most elementary propriety.

The Grand Eunuch observed with contempt his daughter-in-law's inefficiency amid the rules of etiquette! No one of the eighty and one concubines had ever looked so foolish! . . .

Then his disdain shifted to Chti's toilet and head-dress; both were simple and seemly but devoid of all elegance.

He was nevertheless compelled to admit that her face was prepossessing, but as against that merit he noted that her feet, though small, were hardly comparable to those of the Imperial concubines.

As a matter of strict fact he could see nothing really remarkable in his daughter-in-law's appearance.

He therefore murmured jeeringly in his son's ear:
“Behold the beauty who has turned your head! . . .”

Whereupon he motioned Chti to approach and when she had done so and was kneeling ungracefully

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before him he demanded of her without preamble:

"Am I wrong, madam, in supposing that you regard your husband with a warm affection?"

Chti hesitated, dumbfounded, but finally she contrived to stammer nervously:

"Your Excellency could not be mistaken!"

The Grand Eunuch, however, insisted:

"But in what manner, madam, do you love your husband? . . . Is it as the head of your family, as the purveyor of your needs, as the slave of your caprices, as your banker, as a man of intelligence, as your bedfellow or as the companion of your table . . . in fact, in what capacity do you love him . . . kindly enlighten me!"

Chti, in her confusion, knew not how to reply. She was asking herself with some anxiety whither the Grand Eunuch's inquiries could possibly lead.

But with a smile upon his lips Li Pi Siao declared:

"You are unable to express yourself . . . but in any case, whether from one motive or another, you have evidently a deep affection for your dear husband! . . . You will therefore be immensely gratified to learn that he is destined to a most marvelous future. . . . As a signal mark of my benevolence, I authorize my son, Li Pi Tchou, to succeed me, later, in my honorable office! . . ."

Chti regarded the Grand Eunuch blankly; she had not understood.

He continued:

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"Yes, my son will become celebrated throughout the Celestial Empire. . . . He will dominate the Violet Town by his undisputed authority . . . and his occult power will reach far and wide . . . the highest mandarins will tremble at his redoubtable name . . . he will at a word, should he desire it, be able to decapitate them! . . ."

He paused a moment:

"And what have you to say, madam, of this last mentioned privilege?"

Yet more perturbed, Chti murmured:

"It is indeed admirable! . . ."

The Grand Eunuch resumed with satisfaction:

"It is indeed! And your husband will also be entitled to wear handsome robes and to an exalted position at the highest ceremonies . . . he will enjoy a thousand personal gratifications, such as that of stuffing his belly with delectable viands. . . . Well . . . I need say no more. . . . You are, I perceive, well satisfied with the future held out to him whose name you will still have the honor to bear! . . . You have no objections to offer?"

Chti bowed humbly in token of approval, whereupon Li Pi Siao continued in a voice that was almost affable:

"In that which concerns yourself, madam, I can assure you that you will not be forgotten! . . ."

He then described very graciously the luxurious existence which he intended her to lead henceforth,

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dwelling at length upon the handsome garments and jewels that she would receive; finally he assured her that in future the care and education of her son would be a more than adequate outlet for her impulses of tenderness and affection!

Chti, comparatively reassured, now understood perfectly all that her father-in-law was promising her and her smiles of grateful pleasure struck terror to the heart of poor Li Pi Tchou.

The Grand Eunuch concluded:

"And I further intend to accord you, after your decease, the immense honor of reposing among the Lis in a magnificent coffin which I myself shall provide!"

This last token of generosity completed the conquest of the lovely Chti. So deeply was she touched that she could find but a thread of voice wherewith to express her sincere gratitude.

But Li Pi Tchou felt that the moment had indeed come for him to interfere:

"All this is doubtless very fine, my dear Chti, but have you no thought for the sacrifice demanded of me before I can follow my father into the Violet Town?"

And he bent his anguished gaze upon the charms of the lovely Chti.

Never had she seemed to him so seductive: her little eyes, narrowed by their Mongolian lids, had so engaging an expression! . . . There was so much dis-

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tinction in the V of her eyebrows arching outwards to the temples! . . . And that mouth! . . . barely large enough to admit the seed of a watermelon! . . . That lemon-tinted complexion, so young and fresh! . . . and above all, that nose . . . that adorable nose, so minute and so undeveloped that the face retained the flatness of a Buddhist idol! . . .

Never would Li Pi Tchou consent to renounce the luxury of carnally adoring so lovely a being!

And he repeated:

"Surely you forget the little operation which I must undergo. . . ."

Whereupon Chti exclaimed with regrettable thoughtlessness:

"Ah! True, I had overlooked that detail! . . ."

The Grand Eunuch remarked triumphantly:

"You hear her, my son; a detail . . . a mere nothing . . . and this is none of my prompting!"

But Li Pi Tchou protested with indignation:

"She does not know what she is saying . . . she is so troubled, poor soul! . . ."

Turning to Chti, he besought her tenderly:

"Is it not true that you will always love me? . . ."

And with equal simplicity Chti replied:

"Most certainly! . . . Why should I ever cease to love you?"

The Grand Eunuch shrugged his shoulders:

"Truly, I have always held a woman's utterances to be without importance. . . . But Chti exceeds the utmost limits of incoherence. . . . I shall no longer

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trouble myself to try and comprehend her. . . .”

He added, frowning:

“I shall know how to judge of her when she is put to the test.”

Then, addressing his son with determination:

“Let us have no more evasion! . . . I am weary of being your plaything in this comedy of errors! . . . You must now decide. . . . Yes, or No; do you accept this vessel?”

And he held aloft the elegant vessel so generously bestowed by the Holy Man, drawing attention to its graceful form.

“Is it not a charming little coffin?” he simpered.

But Li Pi Tchou was in no mood to appreciate the wit of his venerable sire! With praiseworthy independence he pronounced himself:

“The best of fathers will doubtless excuse the error of an unworthy son! . . . But that son loves his wife and would sooner die than renounce her! . . .”

At these words the Grand Eunuch was convulsed with fury. He bledated invectives and abuse, loading his son and his daughter-in-law with ridicule and maledictions.

He ended by declaring:

“You are both agreed in your idiotic rejection of the incalculable advantages offered by a position as honorable as it is secure, in the Household of the Holy Man! . . . I ought by rights to inflict upon you the chastisements merited by your foolish

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ness . . . but I desire to be merciful . . . I will merely command you to disappear from these parts. . . . I expel you from my house, I exile you . . . together you may enjoy your detestable lusts . . . but far from my offended eyes!"

Thereupon he summoned the servants of his country house and bade them harness a mule to a two-wheeled cart bearing the customary hood of blue linen. As soon as the conveyance was ready the Grand Eunuch caused the unworthy couple to enter it.

They implored permission to take with them their young son, but upon this point Li Pi Siao was inexorable; he reminded his son in sour tones:

"You would not even be capable of supporting him! And moreover, why should the miserable child be exposed to such an example!"

At this the lovely Chti began to weep in concert with her husband's lamentations.

The Grand Eunuch scolded with extreme annoyance.

"What absurd wails! . . . What lack of control! . . . What unseemliness! . . ."

Nevertheless he softened somewhat and addressed Li Pi Tchou:

"Unfortunately you remain my son. . . . And while you undoubtedly deserve to be hung, yet I will not allow the son of the Grand Eunuch to appear as a beggar!"

And he caused to be placed in the cart beside them two chests containing their principal belongings.

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Moreover, in a last impulse of generosity, he handed them the ingot of gold which had been given him by the Holy Man and which had barely been depleted by the purchase of the musical alarm-clock.

"You have now the means with which to live honorably," said he to his son with sad severity. "Obviously the Imperial vessel would have been of infinitely greater value, but since you persist in your obstinate stupidity, get hence as soon as possible, and consider yourself fortunate to have escaped so cheaply! . . ."

He had spoken. With a haughty gesture he bade them depart.

Bowing humbly, Li Pi Tchou seized the reins and whipped up the mule which started off at a brisk trot.

Crouched beneath the hood, Chti cast a final regretful glance towards the family home.

Then she addressed herself to the task of maintaining her balance upon the little stool which provided her only seat. She was severely shaken as the two-wheeled cart lurched amid the ruts and irregularities of the road.

Li Pi Siao, however, had reentered his house with dignity.

He remarked:

"Fortunately, I have two sons."

Whereupon he summoned his second son with a view to offering him the Imperial Vessel.

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And this excellent young man who in his capacity of younger son had always been relegated to a secondary position, almost died of joy at learning that he had become heir to the good fortune of his foolish senior.

CHAPTER SIX

THE two-wheeled cart that bore Li Pi Tchou, his belongings and his beloved, continued its jolting progress amid the ruts of the Imperial Way, if such a term may be applied to the tracks of beaten earth that furrow the face of Northern China.*

On the front of the vehicle, perched upon one of the big shafts, Li Pi Tchou was studying the difficult art of driving a restive and capricious mule.

Beneath the blue hood which covered the cart, the lovely Chti, crouched on her little stool amid bundles and pigskin covered chests, was learning to her cost all the discomforts associated with the temperament of the mule in question.

At one moment a sudden halt would topple her forward, at another, a jerky gallop accompanied by frenzied kicking would throw her almost out of the cart.

This was the first time that Chti had ever traveled. In China a virtuous woman never leaves her home except upon the one solemn occasion of her marriage. She is then borne in a handsome red palanquin, hermetically sealed, from the house of her parents to

* In Southern China there are no roads at all, but merely lanes which meander along the course of the dykes between the rice-swamps. Transport is effected by means of sedan chairs or handcarts.

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that of the magnanimous person who has designed to reimburse them for the cost of her upbringing.

It was therefore for Chti a great novelty thus to behold an outside world which, by rights, she should never have seen; the gratification of her curiosity would doubtless have afforded her much enjoyment, had her little hinder parts suffered less cruelly from the irregularities of the road.

It must, however, be admitted that physical pain completely eclipsed intellectual gratification and that the lovely Chti never for an instant ceased loudly to bewail her plight.

In his sentimental soul, Li Pi Tchou attributed her laments to the despair overwhelming this incomparable spouse at the sudden and cruel banishment from her son and her home.

But he was resolved to console her by the passionate transports of his immense devotion, and this tender thought endowed him with patience.

The road extended as far as the eye could see, dusty and monotonous, across an infinite plain. The high walls of Peking had vanished in the distance. On every side were spread fields of millet or of beans. Here and there were marshes utilized as rice-swamps, and occasional pools wherein heavy buffalo up to their necks in the brackish water sought relief from the summer heat.

Their great horns were reflected like mighty arches in the still water and their dilated nostrils inhaled the pestilent miasmas of the marshes.

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On all sides, bronzed, half-naked peasants bent over their labors and the huge straw hats which protected them from the sun made patches of whiteness against the drab monotony of the dusty land.

Such small bare hills as dominated the countryside were utilized as cemeteries, and thousands of coffins, representing successive generations, lent dignity to these chosen spots.

Li Pi Tchou, moved by the beauty of his surroundings, turned to Chti, his wife.

"What a truly admirable country is China! What activity among the living in the plains and what respect for the dead upon the hills!"

In such wise did Li Pi Tchou, even though degraded to the humble task of muleteer, continue to express himself with that nebulous and symbolic grace that stamps the true scholar.

But the lovely Chti was too deeply engaged in avoiding the jolts of the cart to lend an attractive ear to the distinguished utterances of her loving spouse.

And Li Pi Tchou, in spite of his devotion, was piqued at her lack of response.

A faint misgiving crossed his mind. Was it conceivable that his father had been right?

Was he certain that Chti valued him as highly as he deserved?

In order to rouse himself from so mournful a thought he whipped up the mule, which bounded for-

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ward and the lovely Chti uttered a yet more doleful howl.

"Decidedly," thought Li Pi Tchou with some justification, "our ancestors were wise in debarring wives from travel!"

He determined to postpone any attempt at an understanding with Chti until their journey should be ended.

At nightfall, after many hours of traveling, Li Pi Tchou discerned the ramparts of a small provincial town outlined against the violet horizon.

Once more, he speeded up the mule at the cost of further kicking and of a fresh outburst of complaints from the lovely Chti!

But it was urgent to reach the city before the closing of its gates, for Li Pi Tchou was determined that a pleasant night in a comfortable inn should console him for the vicissitudes of the day.

Favored no doubt by fortune, Li Pi Tchou managed to pass through the monumental gates just as the soldiers of the guard were preparing to close them.

In the penumbra of a summer night Li Pi Tchou advanced at hazard among the winding streets where the merchants were beginning to light their great shop lanterns.

Regardless of the future, Li Pi Tchou inquired the way to the best inn of the town and guided his vehicle with dignity into its courtyard.

Obsequious servants sprang to his assistance and

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the host of the establishment welcomed him with humble salutations.

Disdainfully, Li Pi Tchou commanded that his mule be stabled and himself conducted his wife to the inn's best chamber which he had bespoken.

The innkeeper followed him slyly, exhausting himself in flowery compliments and assurances of welcome.

In reality the worthy man was deeply astonished at seeing a man and woman travel, a proceeding contrary to Chinese custom.

But having remarked the charms and the loveliness of Chti, he concluded that his guest was a libertine who had journeyed some distance to purchase a concubine to his taste!

He therefore retired discreetly after invoking the best of good fortune upon the heads of the shameless pair! . . .

Left alone with his lovely wife, Li Pi Tchou gave vent to a chuckle of satisfaction.

"You will at length receive," said he, "happy amends for this most painful journey!"

And he contemplated her with ecstasy.

How deeply he now congratulated himself on having resisted the temptation of official honors! How lovely and desirable was Chti notwithstanding the ravages of her weary journey.

Li Pi Tchou was so enthralled by her charms that his thoughts outran all filial piety and accused his venerable father of the utmost cruelty!

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He was, however, in haste to demonstrate to Chti her good fortune in having retained her husband entire.

In the whirl of his senses he grimaced with joy and emotion. His little eyes, convulsed, squinted inwards to his flat nose, his mouth was stretched to a tender smile and a nervous tremor agitated his lean fingers to the tips of their interminable and aristocratic nails.

A handsome enclosed bed, constructed like a cupboard, awaited his transports. Having hurled his garments along with those of Chti into the drawers which formed the base of this erection, he joyfully parted the curtains of its upper stratum and joined his delicious wife therein.

Li Pi Tchou now felt himself the happiest man on earth; a painted lantern hanging from the ceiling of the chamber cast many-colored reflections upon the satin skin of his beloved and completed his subjugation.

"It is thus," cooed the poetical Li Pi Tchou, "that the tender sky at dawn is tinted by the most delicate of hues! . . . It is thus that the throat of a dove borrows the sheen of the rainbow! It is thus that the amorous sea reflects the ardor of her royal lover, the sun! . . . It is thus . . ."

He was unable to conclude his eloquent comparisons, for, with a shriek of horror, Chti hurled herself out of his arms and leaped from the bed.

Astounded and dismayed Li Pi Tchou cried:

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"What infernal spirit tears you from celestial delights?"

But the lovely Chti made no reply: she was far too busy catching fleas.

At the same moment Li Pi Tchou realized the full extent of his misfortune, being himself attacked by a violent irritation.

In lofty terms he invoked malediction upon the accursed insects whose incongruous presence destroyed his happiness.

But his vengeful fury was an inadequate substitute for insect powder.

After some moments of wasted eloquence Li Pi Tchou was reduced to joining the lovely Chti in hunting for the offenders.

Abashed and humiliated he wailed:

"Star of my dreams, our ecstasy vanishes in the shades of night!"

But Chti lamented more simply:

"Ah! The hateful creatures! . . ."

And she added prosaically, without so much as a tactful allusion to the vaunted ecstasy:

"And I who was so thankful to rest my aching bones!"

Li Pi Tchou, however, still clung to his night of tenderness and passion.

He opened the window which gave on to a charming little garden wherein dwarf trees, tastefully planted and cultivated, created the illusion of a distant forest. A lake, no bigger than a washing basin,

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contained three large stones representing rocks, and upon one of these stones towered the seven stories of a painted cardboard pagoda not more than three inches in height. On the eaves of its tilted roofs, the breeze swung tiny bells which gave forth a minute and silvery music, and the fireflies dancing in the midst suggested lanterns borne by invisible pilgrims.

Pacified, Li Pi Tchou said to Chti:

"All is not ugly in this inn. It is indeed regrettable that the bed should be infested with fleas, but the landscape displayed before our enchanted gaze is at any rate a delicate compensation."

With inattentive eyes, and smothering a yawn of weariness, Chti acquiesced:

"Yes, the little park is quite attractive!"

Bending lovingly over her Li Pi Tchou continued:

"In a few days' time, when I shall have found a spot suitable to shelter our love, I will buy, thanks to the ingot that my father gave me, a pretty house with a fine garden, even pleasanter than this one which we now admire! . . ."

He dwelt at length upon his plans, describing minutely all the details of the future nest.

Vaguely comforted, Chti insisted:

"And above all you will insure that there shall be no fleas!"

"Most certainly, my lovely Chti," Li Pi Tchou hastened to reply, and he continued his enthusiastic description.

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Suddenly Chti uttered a fresh cry of terror! From the woodland shadow of the dwarf trees came the mewing of a young feline who doubtless imagined himself a tiger in a tropical forest!

"By Buddha!" wailed Chti, "the horrible beast invokes your venerable father! . . ."

Vexed, Li Pi Tchou shrugged his shoulders. He was not so superstitious as to believe that a little cat must of necessity know his father, but he was compelled to admit that its voice was unpleasantly reminiscent of the angry Li Pi Siao.

"An unfortunate coincidence," he agreed with a sigh, and closing the window he sat down beside Chti upon one of the humble stools that furnished the apartment.

And whereas the lovely Chti, worn out with fatigue, began to doze, Li Pi Tchou produced a water-pipe of white metal engraved with the wisdom of the sages.

He cleaned the bowl carefully, with a little brush made for the purpose, and with the aid of a pair of minute pincers he filled it with a quantity of pale yellow tobacco shredded to the fineness of hair.

Then, using a roll of kindled paper in lieu of a match he lighted his pipe resignedly.

Slowly inhaling the smoke, cooled by its passage through the scented water, and expelling it from the dilated nostrils of his flat nose, he sent a thoughtful gaze after the gray swirls which rose billowing to

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lose themselves near the painted lantern suspended from the ceiling.

Gravely he concluded:

“Life itself is nothing but smoke and dreams!”

But the philosophic maxim failed to console him for the bitterness of his situation.

And in this manner did he pass the first sad night of his wanderings.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE next day, at dawn, Li Pi Tchou caused his mule to be harnessed. He was in haste to leave the inn where he had spent so painfully a night of which he had had such great expectations.

This initial disillusionment obscured the gayety of the journey.

The lovely Chti, with swollen eyelids and features drawn by fatigue, displayed no enthusiasm at having to crouch once more beneath the hood of the cart.

For that matter, the harassed Li Pi Tchou himself yawned unceasingly and had no longer the strength to enunciate those graceful periods which usually enhanced his charm.

Finally, the mule, rendered yet more restive and disgusted by its labors of the previous day, literally snorted between the shafts.

Undoubtedly the day was unpropitious and no wise bonze would have counseled the undertaking of any enterprise; but Li Pi Tchou was none the less determined to continue his progress, being loath to remain in an unworthy city, where the best inn was infested by fleas; and what fleas!

Li Pi Tchou and the lovely Chti were still the victims of a most distressful itching; it served, however, to keep them more or less awake!

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Having left behind him the ramparts of the town, Li Pi Tchou found himself once more upon the dusty highroad which led to the mountainous regions visible in the distance.

For the time being the country around him offered the same aspects as that which he had traversed on the previous day.

More fields of millet and of beans; more rice-fields wherein the laboring peasants waded knee-deep in mud; more buffalo submerged in swamps; and always, dominating these swamps and their stench of human sewage, the eternal little hills loaded with coffins; a cemetery above a drain!

But Li Pi Tchou, weary in spirit, no longer troubled to express his enthusiasm and expended all his energies upon vain efforts to induce his mule to trot.

Beneath the hood, Chti, huddled upon her footstool, with nodding head and hanging arms, tried to sleep, despite the itching of her flea-bites and the jolting of the cart.

She could achieve nothing, however, but a pain-ridden torpor.

Towards noon, Li Pi Tchou stopped before a country inn by the roadside, with a view to procuring for himself and Chti as good a meal as possible.

In front of the inn, beneath awnings supported on bamboo poles, a number of coolies, trailers of heavy barrows or palanquin bearers, were already installed before the greasy tables, gorging themselves with repellent voracity.

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In one hand they held a bowl of rice to the level of their lips. With the other they manipulated their chopsticks and savagely shoved into their greedy maws the compact masses of glutinous grains, which they gulped down noisily, almost without mastication. At moments they abandoned the absorption of rice and fished in a communal dish for pieces of vegetable, preserved in rancid castor oil that dripped and flowed down the front of their garments.

When in danger of suffocation they applied to their lips the spout of a teapot, and lifting their elbows with a vulgar gesture imbibed the contents in large gulps; then they wiped their mouths upon their soiled and greasy sleeves.

Li Pi Tchou contemplated these low menials with utter consternation!

He was deeply distressed that the eyes of Chti should be offended by so nasty a spectacle.

A meal was, however, absolutely necessary, and it was also essential to feed and water the mule.

Li Pi Tchou therefore gallantly assisted the lovely Chti to alight from the cart, and pursued by the derisive stare of the coolies, they entered the inn.

The atmosphere was heavy and loaded with the stench of cooking, large and dirty flies filled the air with their buzzing while a big black hog, rooting with grunting snout, sought its provender among the muck-heaps on the ground.

Overcoming his repugnance, Li Pi Tchou established Chti before the least repellent of the tables

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and commanded the innkeeper, who welcomed him with a thousand cringing courtesies, to set before them his best repast.

The innkeeper was dumbfounded: to tell the truth, with the exception of the common rice, the vegetables in castor oil and tea of the coarsest quality, he had nothing to offer.

To these might be added, it is true, a plentiful supply of garlic pods which the coolies outside were already consuming delightedly, and of which the potent aroma was causing Chti's nostrils to quiver with astonishment if not with anticipation; but these last-named dainties could only, in any case, serve as accessories for dessert.

There was also, steaming upon a stove in a secluded corner, a saucepan containing a cabbage broth flavored with a great number of the aforementioned garlic pods.

But mine host was reserving this delectable and highly scented dish for his own consumption.

He therefore assured his noble guests, with much embarrassment, that he was, to his infinite regret, unable to satisfy their requirements, having nothing to set before them but the common food of the coolies.

As Li Pi Tchou and Chti were by this time half dead of hunger, they agreed to sample this gross fare, and derived some consolation from their host's assurance that he could, at any rate, provide good oats for the mule.

With resignation, Li Pi Tchou and Chti began

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their humble meal, which was speedily confined to rice alone, since neither could stomach the vegetables, owing to the rancid condition of the castor oil used in their preparation.

They made amends, however, by eating their rice with extreme elegance, dipping their chopsticks delicately into the bowls upon the table, instead of raising these latter to the level of their lips . . . it is true that one must have time to spare in order to edify the herd by such lessons in deportment!

Through the open windows the coolies stared into the inn, amazed at the elaborate manners adopted by the great ones of the earth in the accomplishment of the simplest actions.

Outside, the mule neighed with satisfaction before his sack of oats: it was evident that this country inn appealed to him.

At the very moment when Li Pi Tchou, under the watchful gaze of the astounded coolies, had emptied his bowl of rice, a sound of martial trumpets was heard, punctuated by the strokes of mighty gongs.

Forcing their way through the coolies, by means of heavy blows, a troop of soldiers entered the inn.

At their head slouched an immense and ferocious Tartar giant.

A large turban was twisted round his head, heavy brows beetled above his smoldering eyes, and enormous black mustaches hung down on either side of a huge mouth with coarse, blubber lips.

Swinging from his shoulder belt hung two great

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newly sharpened swords; but since it was very hot, he contented himself for the moment with using his fan, a fact which helped to reassure Li Pi Tchou, who was of a moderate temper and utterly unused to warlike manifestations.

However, the Tartar giant, with truly military directness, had immediately established himself opposite the lovely Chti, and was appraising her without the least reserve.

Chti lowered her eyes as a modest woman should, and assumed the innocent air dictated by her breeding.

In no way deterred by the sight of such estimable seemliness, the Tartar set himself to attract the attention of this youthful beauty, by giving vent to a series of formidable grunts, expressive of his virility.

Perceiving the drift of matters, Li Pi Tchou prudently sought a means of retreat.

He slipped an ample remuneration into the innkeeper's hands, and signing discreetly to Chti to follow him, edged towards the door.

But already the noble warrior had intervened.

"Is my society distasteful to you, then, sir?"

"On the contrary, I am deeply honored at finding myself in your presence!" protested Li Pi Tchou hypocritically.

"If that is the case, may I ask, sir, why you seem in such haste to escape?"

"I am compelled to leave and must ask you to excuse me. I still have a long journey before me."

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"Really!" replied the Tartar. . . . "Well? You will at any rate drink with me to the success of your journey! . . . It will bring you good fortune!"

Thereupon, seizing a large gourd that hung from his belt, he filled three bowls with a fiery rice-spirit which stank at twenty paces.

Gallantly offering one of these bowls to the lovely Chti, he himself emptied another in one draft to her health.

Chti remained embarrassed, bowl in hand, not knowing what to do.

The Tartar smiled graciously, displaying his mighty teeth, and discarding all restraint, placed his arm round Chti's waist, under pretext of assisting her to drink from the bowl.

Li Pi Tchou, highly indignant, would gladly have crushed his odious rival, but he possessed neither the strength nor the means wherewith to realize his desires.

In any case the giant was contemplating him quite without benevolence, and Li Pi Tchou felt his legs giving under him. A cold sweat broke out upon his brow, but he managed to stammer:

"She is my wife!"

"By Buddha!" The Tartar swore, with a scornful laugh. "That is a likely story! . . . And since when, sir, does a virtuous wife travel on the high-roads? . . . Is her place not beside her own fireside? . . . Really, sir, you mistake me for the last of fools

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when you attempt to foist upon me so childish a tale! . . . I undoubtedly agree that you have excellent taste; madam is charming; but you will permit me, of course, to share your admiration!"

Whereupon, devoid of all shame, he sat himself down upon a stool, and seizing hold of the lovely but appalled Chti, he dandled her playfully upon his knees.

Li Pi Tchou, distraught, flung himself to the ground before him, humbly imploring:

"I beg of you to let me explain all!"

"Speak, then, sir, I do not prevent you," said the Tartar with condescension.

"Well, then! Here is the exact truth. . . . You must first know that I am the unworthy son of the Venerable Grand Eunuch! . . ." began the unfortunate Li Pi Tchou.

But he was unable to conclude his sentence, for the Tartar, whose education was elementary, burst into a roar of laughter that shook the inn.

Chti attempted courageously to support the wretched Li Pi Tchou:

"It is I who will explain to you, sir! . . . My husband, being singled out for a marvelous future of financial prosperity, public esteem, and for the honor of becoming a high official, has renounced all these precious advantages in order to remain to me entire! . . ."

"Indeed!" cried the Tartar. "What a peculiar

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idea! . . . Well, I can at any rate ascertain whether he had good cause!"

And with unconcealed ardor he proceeded to embrace the lovely Chti!

In utter desperation, Li Pi Tchou groveled before him, wailing:

"By everything that I hold most sacred I implore you, most great and noble Lord. . . ."

"Lord of what?" grumbled the Tartar.

Li Pi Tchou stammered in a timid voice:

" . . . Of these gentlemen, the brigands!" And he made a doubtful gesture towards the Tartar's suite.

The warrior fairly bellowed with indignation:

"Have your ears heard, oh, my comrades, the gibing of this libertine! . . . He calls us brigands! . . . He permits himself to insult the virtuous warriors that serve His Majesty the Holy Man! . . . And this scoundrel has withal the impudence to assert that he is the son of the Venerated Li Pi Siao! . . . We'll have his head off, here and now, to teach him that his jests are out of place! . . ."

And the Tartar made a sign to his soldiers. In the twinkling of an eye, they had seized Li Pi Tchou and bound his arms. Then they forced him to his knees.

Thereupon one of them grasped his pigtail, and drawing it forward over the crown of his head, hauled upon it in order to compel him to stretch his neck to the blow.

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Another drew his great sword and seizing the hilt in both hands, began to leap to and fro, preparatory to achieving the exact impetus needful for severing the head at one blow.

To do so was with him a point of honor.

Chti, however, clung in desperation to the Tartar's neck, sobbing:

"Excellency, have pity, I beseech you! . . . You who are the greatest, the handsomest, the strongest! . . ."

"That is true," conceded the gratified Tartar, without false modesty.

He added gallantly:

"I desire also to be the most amiable! . . ."

And with a gesture he arrested the descent of the already whirling sword.

Then he explained.

"This man is more fool than knave! . . . Let us be magnanimous! . . ."

He ordered them to drag Li Pi Tchou into the yard of the inn where they should content themselves with applying a hundred strokes of the bastinado to the soles of his feet!

Satisfied at having displayed so notable a generosity, the Tartar proceeded to show the lovely Chti what an agreeable companion he could be, when so disposed.

And by a noble sacrifice of herself Chti was enabled to save Li Pi Tchou from a more cruel torment.

She even experienced a certain satisfaction in her

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sublime act of devotion, so admirable was her greatness of soul.

According to a wise and beautiful Buddhist maxim:
True sacrifice should be accomplished smiling.

CHAPTER EIGHT

As a token of the pleasure that he had enjoyed in the company of the lovely Chti, and also as a sign to her husband that he bore him no unworthy grudge for his impertinence, the noble Tartar made a gracious gift to Li Pi Tchou of the handsome cane with which he had been flogged.

And Li Pi Tchou, the soles of whose feet were bleeding, made thankful use of the support afforded him by this gift, as a means of painfully reaching his conveyance.

Borne thither in the arms of the Grand Tartar, who used her with every consideration, Chti was already installed beneath the hood!

Upon her finger, beside the marriage circlet, flashed another ring, placed there with ironical generosity, by the conqueror—the ring in question was, by the way, a souvenir of one of his numerous military exploits.

This amiable warrior took pleasure in decking youthful beauties in the gems ravished from those of more advanced years; he was decidedly a man of taste. He was also of a more finished education than had appeared to Li Pi Tchou, who was foolishly narrow in his contempt for the military caste.

The Grand Tartar evolved yet another gallantry,

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causing the trumpets to be blown and the gongs to be sounded, in order to celebrate the departure of the lovely Chti.

Electrified by these martial sounds the mule, after cutting a series of joyful capers, broke into a frenzied gallop, which all Li Pi Tchou's efforts were powerless to moderate.

While Chti, abominably shaken, collapsed pell-mell amidst the confusion of their possessions.

At length the mule, out of breath, slowed down to a walking pace.

Half stunned by successive misfortunes, Li Pi Tchou was at last able to turn his head and to enlist the sympathies of Chti in his fury and despair.

"How horrible an adventure," he wailed, "and how coarse and brutal are these barbarians. Truly the Chinese are wise in relegating them to the lowest ranks of society!"

Chti, who was still seeking to disentangle herself from the mass of their possessions, merely replied with a certain asperity:

"Of what use is it to bewail the past? . . . You would be better employed stopping your mule, if indeed you have the strength to do so, and in assisting me to free myself from all this disorder!"

Obediently, Li Pi Tchou managed somehow to stop the mule, and dragged himself on all fours to the back of the cart, in order to assist his wife.

But at that moment he caught sight of the new ring.

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"What is this?" he demanded in a shaking voice. And Chti replied thoughtlessly, if with amiable frankness.

"It is a remembrance from the Grand Tartar!"

At these words Li Pi Tchou felt himself filled with a righteous indignation:

"What? . . . You have not yet torn from your finger his detestable gift, and thrown it with repugnance into the filth of the highroad?"

Without undue emotion Chti remarked:

"This ring is unusually beautiful and represents a high value, have you not realized that?"

"And what of it?" cried poor Li Pi Tchou impetuously.

But the lovely Chti replied with the utmost calm.

"I perfectly understand that the sight of this magnificent jewel awakens in you the most painful emotions, for which sentiments I am becomingly grateful. . . . But, since the past is in any case irremediable, why deprive oneself of a slight consolation?"

Li Pi Tchou stared at his wife in abject dismay.

She had uttered her preposterous sentiments with such simplicity and candor that he remained speechless.

A sad revolution was taking place in the heart of Li Pi Tchou.

These then were the thoughts and utterances of the lovely Chti after their ghastly experience!

And to think that it was for such a love as this

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that he had refused to become an honorable functionary!

Li Pi Tchou began to experience twinges of regret for having foolishly compromised so rosy a future. His chastened spirit felt some remorse at having displeased the best of fathers, who, in offering him the little Imperial Vessel, had beyond all doubt, sought only to assure his happiness.

He did not, however, dare to assail the lovely Chti with the bitter reproaches that she deserved; setting aside, therefore, the question of the ring, which overwhelmed him with disgust, he dragged himself to the front of the cart and once more took up the reins.

The sun was already nearing the horizon, and as far as the eye could see the melancholy plain revealed no human habitation.

Li Pi Tchou, who feared lest night should overtake them in this solitude, urged his mule to quicken its pace.

But it seemed that nothing short of another military fanfare would rouse it to energy.

When struck with the whip it kicked violently, but firmly adhered to its leisured progress.

At length, as night fell, Li Pi Tchou gained the borders of a forest whose dark shadows clustered around the base of a hilly country strewn with rocks and shrubs.

The road wound zigzagging into the depths of the thick woods.

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Li Pi Tchou was soon surrounded by total darkness.

The branches of vast trees were outlined in inky black against a stormy sky, across which large gray clouds, edged with silver by the moonlight, passed like a procession of menacing dragons.

Hunched beneath the shadow of the hood the lovely Chti trembled in every limb.

Seized with superstitious terror, she listened to the long sighs of the wind wailing in the depths of the forest.

All the old tales of the Fong Shui* which her nurse had told her as a child, returned to terrify her.

What evil spirits, what wicked genii must wander in this accursed forest!

Who could tell? Perhaps even one of those dragons whose shadows passed across the sky might be pacing the darkness. And with what ease would he devour the cart, the mule and the lovely Chti herself.

Li Pi Tchou, for his part, was very far from easy in his mind.

It was the first time in his life that he found himself thus at dead of night, alone and defenseless in the midst of a gloomy forest.

Quite beside herself Chti wailed:

"Oh! If only we had a giant like the Grand Tartar to defend us now!"

* Spirits and Genii of the winds and waters.

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In spite of his anxiety, Li Pi Tchou experienced a bitterness at this regrettable and unseemly wish.

In a trembling voice he protested:

"Madam, I forbid you to mention that soldier! . . . And in any case, what cause have you for fear? Am I not here beside you?"

But Chti derived small comfort from such futile bravado. She had less than no confidence in the physical valor of her spouse.

And for that matter, what could any one avail against the powers of darkness?

All of a sudden, just as Li Pi Tchou had reached a moonlit clearing, the mule shied violently and then came to an abrupt halt, blowing with terror.

Fantastic shadows had risen from the long grass and were advancing towards the wagon.

In the moonlight, Li Pi Tchou was soon able to distinguish tall fellows with the military turban wound round their heads.

He could not refrain from murmuring:

"More soldiers! We are lost!"

Chti, on the other hand, experienced a positive relief. Her virtue might once more be compromised, but she would at any rate be rescued from the dragon's claws.

Meanwhile, sword in hand, and a knife between the teeth, the unknown assailants had leaped upon the cart.

In the twinkling of an eye the unfortunate Li Pi

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Tchou was seized by powerful hands, bound and deposited on the ground like an inanimate parcel.

Then his terrible assailants set to work to search and despoil him.

The discovery of the ingot of gold hidden in Li Pi Tchou's long sleeve aroused their noisy enthusiasm, and they started fighting furiously among themselves for its possession.

A species of Hercules, who appeared to command them, settled their difference by pocketing the object under dispute; he then ordered them to extend their propitious search to the interior of the cart.

They drew forth firstly garments and packages and also the pigskin covered trunks, which they gutted with avidity.

And lastly they brought to light the lovely Chti, who had hidden herself at the back of the wagon, having quickly realized that the supposed soldiers were in reality a band of the ferocious Khonghouses, whose very name struck terror to the heart of all northern China.

Half dead with fear she was led into the presence of the Grand Chief of the Khonghouses, who, most fortunately, had the good taste to consider her charming.

Li Pi Tchou, however, having learned to his cost the consequence of employing unsuitable epithets in the presence of noble warriors, thought it opportune to flatter this new master and stammered humbly:

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"I do beseech you, my Lord the Grand Military Commander . . ."

He was unable to complete his sentence, for the potent fist of the giant hit him straight in the mouth, breaking two of his teeth, as the Grand Chief of the Khonghouses bellowed:

"Do but hearken to this insolent ruffian who dares to call me a soldier! . . . Have we then the aspect of salaried servants! . . . Of paid bullies? . . . As I live, the rascal has no excuse to offer!"

And seizing the root of Li Pi Tchou's pigtail, he shook him brutally by the head.

"Learn then, sirrah, that we are frank and honest Khonghouses, and that we earn our living valiantly, without stooping to ask wages of His Majesty the Holy Man! . . . Obviously, and I admit the fact, we have formerly suffered the humiliation of military service. . . . But we have long since freed ourselves from so base a slavery! . . ."

One of the brigands added with a laugh:

"In any case, our wage was so seldom paid us! . . ."

But the Chief of the Khonghouses rebuked him with dignity:

"Do not belittle our merit in the eyes of this wretch who is already only too anxious to miscall us."

Then, seized with a fresh access of fury towards the inoffensive Li Pi Tchou, he shook him once more violently by the head and declared:

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"To teach you how to live, sir, we will now impale you."

Whereupon he commanded that a sharpened stake should be fixed upright in the ground.

With glazing eyes, Li Pi Tchou looked on at the preparations for his execution; he had no longer the strength to utter a protest.

Already muscular arms held his shrinking person suspended in the air, preparatory to allowing it to fall in a graceful sitting posture upon the terrible stake, when Chti, whom the brigand chief had forgotten in his wrath, flung herself at his feet.

Sobbing, she began her supplication in the terms that had already served her so well with the Grand Tartar:

"You who are the greatest, the strongest and the handsomest . . ."

She had no need to complete her sentence.

Inordinately flattered in his masculine vanity, the Grand Chief of the Khonghouses was immediately mollified:

"And what is your desire, madam?" inquired he in tones of condescension.

Chti replied hastily:

"That my husband should not be impaled! . . . If you could but know, Excellency, the sacrifices which that man has made for my sake . . . if you could only know how good he is, how modest, of how gentle a nature, and . . ."

The brigand interrupted her impatiently:

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"The qualities which, no doubt out of generosity, you ascribe to your husband, are of no interest to me. . . . But, since such is your wish, I am willing to spare him the impaling, despite the fact that it might have lent to his features some originality of expression. . . . For, be it said without offense, madam, your husband looks a perfect fool!"

Fearful of contradicting the powerful brigand, Chti admitted:

"Yes, my poor husband is indeed something of a simpleton:

The brigand laughed:

"We'll wake him up for you, madam! He shall look lively enough presently."

Then, addressing his men:

"Ho, there, you others, you are to lay this simpleton face downwards by the roadside, and when you have decorously removed his breeches, you will bestow upon the uncovered portion of his person two hundred strokes of that bamboo which I now perceive lying by his side and with which he doubtless purposed to attack us!"

Li Pi Tchou, who had recovered a modicum of self-possession, since hearing that he was to be spared the anguish of being impaled living, here protested humbly:

"Never, I swear it, did so impious a thought cross my mind. To tell the truth, that cane was presented to me this very afternoon, by a soldier! . . ."

"By Buddha!" cried the infuriated Khonghouse

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Chief, "do you dare to speak again of soldiers . . .?"

But Chti explained:

"My poor husband's fear of soldiers is as great as your contempt for them. . . . But he did not dare to refuse this cane, which was offered in derision by the brutes who had used it to give him a hundred strokes on the soles of his feet. . . . And the proof thereof, Excellency, is that my poor husband is quite unable to stand! . . ."

The brigand interrupted her sarcastically:

"Ah, well! I will bestow upon this already privileged individual the further favor of making him unable to sit. He will, however, retain the immense compensation of being able to lie down! . . ."

And with an air of superiority, in order to show that despite his profession he could boast of an education, the brigand declaimed:

"An ancient and wise Buddhist proverb declares that: 'It is better to recline than to remain sitting!'"

To these words the incorrigible Li Pi Tchou, carried away by his pride of learning, thought fit to add:

"And the same proverb further declares that: 'It is better to be dead than lying down!'"

Dumbfounded for a moment, the Khonghouse Chief soon rejoined derisively:

"You are, I perceive, sir, of a witty turn of mind—albeit your wit is somewhat imprudent. I might well grant you its immediate and complete recompense. But as I know you to be modest in your desires, I am

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confident that you will be satisfied to express your approval of that part of the proverb at which my quotation stopped short. You will doubtless be content to remain lying down. In the event, however, of your being dissatisfied, I am at your orders and more than willing to grant you the means of completely realizing the merits of the proverb of whose conclusion you so tactfully reminded me."

But Li Pi Tchou prudently held his peace and renounced any further parade of his ready wit.

He made no protest when the Khonghouses stretched him face downwards by the roadside.

While he groaned beneath the strokes of the cane, the Chief of the Khonghouses was busily engaged in demonstrating to the lovely Chti the depth of his admiration.

And Chti, resigned, opposed but faint resistance.

She was, incidentally, learning to sacrifice herself without undue repining, in order to save the life of her honored husband.

Unfortunately for her, the Chief of the Khonghouses had a soul more generous than that of the Grand Tartar.

He was magnanimously unwilling to deprive his men of the pleasure of appreciating, in their turn, the charms of the lovely Chti.

However, he objected to their stripping her of her jewels, and he even had the gallantry to slip onto her arm, as a parting token of esteem, a very hand-

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some bracelet which he had stolen in the course of a recent expedition.

But Chti was so exhausted by repeated emotions that she lacked the strength to utter even a word of thanks.

“Women are often ungrateful,” remarked the Khonghouse Chief with placidity, and having courteously saluted the lovely Chti, now extended on the ground beside her noble husband, he and his men withdrew, taking with them the mule and the wagon, loaded with the baggage which they had neatly restored to its place.

CHAPTER NINE

LI PI TCHOU, as the Khonghouse Chief had so graciously predicted, was now not only unable to walk, but was equally unable to sit. He had reached the recumbent stage of the Buddhist proverb. So painful were his buttocks that even that position necessitated lying upon his stomach.

He passed the night wailing and lamenting, while the lovely Chti, squatting beside him, shivered with terror at the thought of the dragon that might at any moment leap from the darkness and devour her. She would have welcomed the presence of all the Khonghouses and Tartars of the earth, and this notwithstanding any further risks to her virtue.

At length daybreak touched the treetops. The storm clouds had passed away and the stars had faded, one by one, from the peaceful sky.

Presently a rosy tint pervaded the atmosphere and a lyre-bird celebrated with melodious notes the dawn of a beautiful summer's morning.

A little reassured, Chti began to collect her scattered senses. As a devoted wife, her first tender looks were bent on Li Pi Tchou.

The poor wretch lay prone upon his stomach and afforded a dismal spectacle.

The Khonghouses had seen fit to strip him of all his

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garments, even to his hose, but in an impulse either of decency or of generosity, they had clad him in an ancient pair of breeches and in a ragged shirt, both stolen, no doubt, from some poor devil whom they had assaulted.

In this sad plight, Chti almost hesitated to identify her respected lord, whose back, in any case was all that she could perceive, but she speedily recognized the accents of his loud lamentations.

In a gentle voice she urged him:

"Could you not at any rate lie upon your side, so that I may be recreated by the sight of your noble features?"

Touched by this mark of affection, Li Pi Tchou turned painfully onto his side and bent his still distracted gaze upon the lovely Chti:

"Ah!" he wailed, "what a misfortune! Here we are alone and lost in this gloomy forest! Those accursed Khonghouses have robbed me of my handsome mule, of my wagon, of my possessions and of all my baggage! They have even stripped me of my garments! And they have bereft me of the ingot of gold which was to have been our means of subsistence!"

At that moment he caught sight of the handsome bracelet upon Chti's wrist and uttered a heart-rending sigh:

"And so," he cried, "while I was being so cruelly flogged, you . . ."

But he was unable to continue; sobs choked his

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utterance. In any case, the loss of the two teeth that the Khonghouse Chief had broken was an impediment of his speech, and his lips were so swollen that he enunciated with difficulty.

Without permitting this painful detail to distress her unduly, Chti remarked reasonably:

"I understand your immense suffering . . . you have been cruelly treated, and so, for that matter, have I. . . . But I beg of you not to command that I throw away this bracelet with repugnance, as I think you are about to do so soon as your sobs subside and your tongue has regained its eloquence. . . . Pray reflect that this ring given me by the Grand Tartar and this bracelet bestowed upon me by the Chief of the Khonghouses are the only objects of value remaining to us whereby we can preserve ourselves from want! . . ."

Li Pi Tchou, dismayed, dared not protest; nevertheless he would have preferred to die of hunger rather than to see beneath his eyes the abhorred gifts that covered him with confusion.

Meanwhile Chti herself was complaining:

"What shall we do? . . . You cannot even achieve a sitting posture; and as for me, my good parents, as you know, broke my feet in so elegant a manner that I should be utterly incapable of walking more than one li in an entire day! . . ."

The thought that his wife possessed such exquisitely small feet brought a little consolation to Li Pi Tchou.

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Life still held for him the privilege of admiring them, which was well worth the most cruel torments.

Gravely he declaimed:

"Your small feet are like unto golden lilies whose velvet calyx invites the caresses of a lover's eyes!"

But Chti, who was for the moment insensible to even the most exquisite poetry, merely replied:

"Alas, neither of us is able to walk! . . . Must we then die of hunger far from all succor in this hateful solitude! . . ."

And she in her turn began to weep.

The hours passed slowly. Each hour seemed a century and brought no relief to their natural dismay and consternation.

Chti, ever superstitious, declared:

"Only a miracle can save us!"

And she began to recite fervently all the prayers and all the litanies of her childhood. In order to secure a better chance for their being heard, she addressed them indiscriminately to all the venerable Buddhas, to all the good genii whom she knew by name, and also to the spirits who people the air in such numbers that one of them, at any rate, would be likely to hear her supplications.

Finally, just as Chti was beginning to despair of the entire hierarchy of heaven, the miracle appeared in the shape of a fat begging bonze who approached them in a donkey-cart.

Seized with superstitious terror of what she took

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to be an apparition summoned by her invocations, Chti hid herself in the long grass.

The honest religious man whose donkey was crossing the clearing at a brisk trot, perceived at first only the miserable Li Pi Tchou, groaning on the ground in his disreputable garments.

"Here," thought the bonze, "is another of these insufferable beggars, who try, however vainly, to spoil my market!"

He was therefore preparing to pass by without so much as a scornful glance at his pitiable rival, when Chti, who had had time to realize that this bonze was no celestial vision, but as solid flesh and blood as his ass, rose in haste from the high grasses among which she had been concealed, and uttered a despairing cry:

"My Reverened Father, have compassion, I implore you, on our distress!"

At this feminine appeal the bonze started with astonishment! How came it that a woman, and one, moreover, showing every sign of a distinguished origin, should be lost in this solitude, together with a disreputable beggar?

Being curious to elucidate the mystery, the pious traveler checked his ass.

Of a suspicious temperament, however, he began: "I warn you, madam, that if you pretend to be the incarnation of an evil spirit, I am not without the means of defending myself."

Thus saying he seized in one hand the staff which he used to correct his beast, while in the other he

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brandished a species of grimacing little Buddha, designed to dispel enchantments.

But Chti, seeing clearly that she had to do with a worthy religious, replied without emotion:

"Reassure yourself, my Reverend Father, I am but a humble creature that implores your compassion.

. . . No doubt my presence in these lonely parts must strike you as strange. . . . But in reality I am but a distracted and faithful wife, who accompanies her worthy husband upon a voyage imposed by the cruelty of an unjust fate! . . ."

And the lovely Chti permitted herself to smile very graciously upon the good fat monk, in order to complete his subjugation.

Mollified, the worthy man laid down his staff and his little Buddha and inquired with benevolent solicitude:

"I am willing to believe you, madam, but where then is your husband? . . . Have you by any chance lost him on the way?"

Chti exclaimed in astonishment:

"But you behold him, lying at your feet! . . ."

The bonze, however, pretending to search, declared:

"Frankly, I am quite unable to perceive him!"

Then, pointing with extended finger to the lamentable Li Pi Tchou, Chti exclaimed:

"But, my Reverend Father, this is he!"

"What!" cried the astounded bonze. "Is this thing

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your husband! . . . Oh, madam! . . ." And he broke off, speechless at the thought that this lovely woman should thus venture to ridicule his holy presence.

Chti, however, explained:

"Alas, I understand only too well your amazement at the plight wherein you find my honored husband. . . . In truth the poor man looks pitiable in his rags. . . . His bleeding feet make him unable to stand, while the equally cruel condition of another part of his person forbids of his sitting down. His swollen lips, moreover, prevent him from pronouncing those respectful compliments which he would normally hasten to offer to your honorable presence. . . . But, be charitable, my Reverend Father. . . . If my husband finds himself in so sad a plight, the fault is none of his. . . . The Tartars and the Khonghouses alone are responsible! . . . And if you will allow me, I will here and now relate to you our most harrowing experiences! . . ."

"Nay, madam," interrupted the bonze with benevolence. "It is useless to distress yourself further. . . . I believe you. . . ."

And he added simply:

"True charity requires no explanations. If it pleases you to travel with me, you have but to climb into my conveyance."

The ever faithful Chti rejoined:

"I will do so with pleasure, as soon as you have helped me to lift my poor husband into the cart!"

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"Oh, oh," grumbled the bonze. "Do you think that this is absolutely necessary? My ass is already somewhat tired, and will be hard put to it to drag such a load! . . ."

But Chti insisted:

"I beg of you, my Reverend Father; we cannot thus abandon this unfortunate creature! . . ."

Much affected, since, after all, his very existence was at stake, Li Pi Tchou also urged:

"You will undoubtedly reincarnate as a living Buddha if you perform this virtuous action! . . .

The bonze replied with arrogance:

"I have no need, sir, of your foolish assurances; I am quite capable of attending to my own future! . . ."

Happily Chti brought forward the excuse that was becoming customary:

"Excuse him, all his misfortunes have to some extent affected his brain. . . ."

"So I perceive," said the bonze, sourly. "He certainly looks a simpleton; and I quite understand that the Tartars and the Khonghouses should have tried to stir him up, if only with a view to obliging you, madam!"

"Alas," said Chti, "I also have suffered much from their attentions!"

"And what did they do to you?" inquired the charitable religious in unctuous tones.

But Chti confined herself to lowering her eyes modestly and assuming a contrite expression.

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"Is that so, madam?" cried the bonze, whose understanding was not so limited as to preclude of his grasping her meaning. Then he added in a consoling voice:

"Those poor folk do undoubtedly at times give way to regrettable excesses; but their natures are at heart not evil. . . . We Buddhist priests, for example, are not only quite without fear of them, but we even manage to influence them to our advantage!"

"And how is that accomplished?" asked Chti, assailed in her turn by a lively curiosity.

"Oh, very simply! . . . These folk, despite their peccadilloes, are not insensible to a gentle persuasion . . . and in default of true piety they invariably retain an amiable superstition. . . . Thus, we pray for them. . . . We occasionally celebrate their military achievements . . . when these are not too licentious. . . . And in any case, when misfortune overtakes them, we never refuse to go piously and with great pomp to inter their remains! . . . And thus we live upon quite good terms with these warlike people, who even, at times, are useful to us in return, lending us their aid in the painful struggle that we maintain against those miscreants and unbelievers who dare to ridicule our sacred practices. . . ."

"But that is indeed admirable!" cried Chti in astonishment. And she added with conviction:

"How deeply I regret that my poor husband has not your intelligence!"

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Much flattered, the bonze bowed, and with another graceful smile, Chti resumed:

"Then, my Reverend Father, let me behold you as magnanimous as you are intelligent! . . ."

Whereupon she once more insisted that the monk should agree to placing Li Pi Tchou in the donkey-cart.

Finally, after many entreaties, the religious consented to performing this meritorious action.

With great difficulty and much puffing and blowing he contrived to deposit Li Pi Tchou, like a large parcel in the back of the cart; then, having gallantly established the lovely Chti on the seat at his side, he resumed his journey to his monastery, where the Grand Prior, its regent and administrator, doubtless awaited with impatience the fruits of his begging.

CHAPTER TEN

THE monastery of the Celestial Clouds, towards which the fat bonze was proceeding, was pleasantly situated half way up a hill that overlooked the forest wherein the poor Li Pi Tchou had so nearly perished.

It consisted of a series of one-storied buildings connected together by covered sheds and paved courtyards.

In the center, a large Buddhist temple presided over this holy city, in all the splendor of its arched and gabled roofs of polished tiles.

On all sides, opening onto the cloisters that surrounded the courtyards, were the cells of the good monks.

The vast refectory, flanked by spacious kitchens, was situated in the backyard, and was, together with the Buddhist temple the chief center of attraction.

Finally, the outer walls which enclosed all these buildings extended up the hillside surrounding a handsome park planted with trees of every description and a fertile vegetable garden.

A stream which babbled gayly as it tumbled in cascades from rock to rock formed a series of little lakes within this park, offering harborage to long-headed tortoises, agile water snakes and goldfish with queer goggle eyes and fins as large as wings. Upon

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tiny artificial islands were thickets of priceless dwarf trees.

Birds of all descriptions, tended by the good monks, caroled from every flowering shrub, and huge gold and green lizards shone like precious stones on the rocks where they basked lazily in the sunshine.

In the middle of this enchanting park, rising majestically above the roofs of the monastery, stood the private pavilion of His Holiness the Grand Prior.

This graceful abode was perched upon artificial rocks above the largest lake, wherein multicolored and gaudy waterfowl swam amid clumps of rushes.

Pink and white lotus flowers lying amid their large pale green leaves greeted the eyes of His Holiness the Grand Prior whenever he deigned to linger on his veranda and to contemplate his monastery.

Among other adornments, this charming pavilion boasted a series of ascending gables bearing silver bells whose ringing accompanied His Holiness the Grand Prior whenever he recited his litanies.

It was in every respect a dwelling worthy of so eminent a Superior and of the agreeable existence which he enjoyed within its precincts.

And in truth His Holiness the Grand Prior, as was only right, lived most comfortably on the plentiful proceeds of his monastery, and being thus raised above all base and material anxieties, he wisely divided his time into three equal parts.

One part was devoted to prayer, to meditation or to the reading of edifying literature; the second was

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allocated to the enjoyment of the seemly pleasures of a well-garnished table, to exercise in his beautiful park or to the reception of the chosen faithful; the third and last part was claimed by wholesome and restorative slumber.

As a matter of fact the other monks observed much the same rule and prospered under such amiable discipline.

An entire flock of shaven-headed little bonzelings filled the offices of choristers, servants and kitchen boys. According to the hour of day they brushed the garments of the good monks, prepared their sacerdotal vestments or carefully shaved the hairs from their nostrils and ears with minute razors. At other times they mumbled the responses of the various offices, played upon the flute, thumped the gongs to attract divine attention or stoked the ovens in the kitchen.

They also performed the task of dusting the figurines in the Gallery of Torments. There might be seen for the maintenance of the faithful in a state of salutary fear, the symbolical images of all the cruel punishments awaiting the wicked in the next world.

Bull-headed devils with fearsome horns tore out with pincers the teeth and nails of miserable patients. Other devils placed them on spits and roasted them like common game, while a final detachment clawed their entrails with curved talons.

Upon red lacquer placards could be read in bold black letters the sundry causes resulting in these remarkable operations. One could study an orderly list

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of the various crimes—assassinations, thefts and rape; then the minor offenses such as debauch, drunkenness and kindred peccadilloes.

The lack of Filial Piety and neglect of the Cult of Ancestors were specially punished in a terrible fashion; but the most cruel of all tortures were naturally reserved for unbelievers, blasphemers and for misers who had displayed a distressing economy in the matter of pious offerings and charitable donations.

After long contemplation of this gallery, the faithful would indeed have been hard of heart and of understanding had they failed to repent of their misdeeds, and above all to open their purses in honor of those who prayed so fervently for their redemption.

But the bonzelings, accustomed to the inoffensive spectacle of horrors in wood and plaster, shoved their little brooms casually into the highly colored faces of the most terrific devils.

Daily contact with their worthy superiors had, in any case, made them skeptical, and they turned up their noses at all the paraphernalia designed to dismay pious simpletons.

Finally, yet one more duty devolved upon the bonzelings; namely, the care of a fairly extensive menagerie situated at the park gates.

It consisted of numerous monsters, such as two-headed calves, sheep with five legs, Siamese-twin sucking-pigs and kindred abominations.

This menagerie was a great object of curiosity

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throughout the neighborhood; it attracted numerous visitors to the monastery, even from among the infidel.

Moreover, when they learned that the monsters were merely reincarnations of the unbelieving, many allowed themselves to be touched or terrified and did not hesitate to offer propitiatory gifts to avert the maledictions invoked upon them by the monks in the event of their remaining obdurate.

There were many other objects of attraction and veneration in the monastery of the Celestial Clouds, but to these the bonzes themselves attended, as a means of beguiling their leisure.

Meanwhile, night was falling and His Holiness the Grand Prior began to be anxious at the thought that one of his begging brothers had not yet returned. What could have happened to him? The good monk had certainly nothing to fear from the Tartars or the Khonghouses, and no one else would have had the audacity to attack his venerable person and to steal the sacred alms.

His delay was therefore inexplicable, unless he had so far forgotten himself as to get drunk on the road.

At last, just as the Grand Prior was beginning to miscall the poor man, there was a creaking of the hinges of the heavy entrance gates and he heard the wheels of the donkey-cart rumbling on the cobbles of the courtyard.

He heaved a sigh of thankfulness directed mainly

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towards the alms, and advanced to meet the laggard.

The begging bonze had, out of decency, deposited the lovely Chti at the porter's lodge; he could not at so late an hour introduce a woman into the monastery of the Celestial Clouds, without first obtaining the direct authority of His Holiness the Grand Prior.

His cart therefore contained only Li Pi Tchou, who, still moaning, wallowed in the bottom of the vehicle like a pig on its way to slaughter.

Mistaking the nature of these sounds, His Holiness the Grand Prior exclaimed jovially:

"I now understand, my dear brother, the cause of your delay! . . . But, you had an excellent inspiration!"

And he added unctuously:

"Is he very fat? . . ."

The begging monk smiled bitterly.

"He is as thin as it is possible to be and in a pitiable condition! . . ."

His Holiness the Grand Prior, much astounded, peered into the back of the cart and there perceived the miserable and ragged Li Pi Tchou.

"My dear brother," he exclaimed, "what have you brought me? . . ."

And he inspected him with some anxiety, asking himself whether the monk had not lost his senses before committing so absurd and misplaced an act of charity.

The bonze, much embarrassed, explained to his Superior:

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"I naturally understand your Excellency's amazement . . . But I allowed myself to be persuaded by the supplications of a poor young woman who pleaded this ragged fellow's cause! . . . Then, it struck me that as soon as he has recovered, this unfortunate, out of gratitude, would undertake all those menial offices which disgust our bonzelings! . . ."

Somewhat reassured regarding the mental condition of his subordinate, His Holiness the Grand Prior agreed:

"Yes, that is by no means a bad idea! . . . I must reflect upon it . . ."

But he added with some annoyance:

"I should all the same have much preferred an edible animal! . . ."

Li Pi Tchou, who had overheard this graceful compliment, managed to remark timidly:

"Despite the pitiable state to which your Eminence sees me reduced, I am a scholar."

And he displayed, as proof irrefutable, the long nails which adorned his aristocratic fingers.

The Grand Prior started:

"Your nails, my good sir, are repulsively dirty . . . Moreover, I have less than no liking for scholars, unless they be of our order!"

Whereupon he frowned angrily.

Li Pi Tchou, much alarmed, was already sorry that he had spoken, for he was beginning to understand that it is highly dangerous to open one's mouth in the presence of unknown powers.

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Fortunately for him His Holiness the Grand Prior was pursuing another train of thought:

"And this woman of whom you spoke?" he inquired curiously of the begging monk.

That worthy man, who understood discipline, replied with frankness:

"I left her at the porter's lodge, pending the receipt of your Eminence's commands!"

At that moment the incorrigible Li Pi Tchou murmured in strangled tones:

"She is mine! . . ."

"What is the varlet saying now?" grumbled His Holiness the Grand Prior.

"Oh! Your Eminence need attach no importance to anything the vagabond may say . . . He is weak-minded; he raves! . . ." declared the bonze.

Then he added:

"Will your Eminence be pleased to give me your instructions regarding the young woman whom I brought with me in my donkey-cart!"

His Holiness the Grand Prior wisely declared:

"I should first wish to ascertain whether she is worthy of being admitted to this monastery . . . Our rule, my dear brother, as you are well aware, forbids the presence at night of one of these vile creatures in our midst! . . . Nevertheless, terms can occasionally be made with Heaven . . . Charity, for instance, may sometimes dictate a modification of this particular rule . . . Necessity is equally recognized, and such a person might, for instance, be in-

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dispensable for the service of cleaning our kitchen stoves . . . In fact there are many other good reasons that might justify a respectable exception! . . .”

He smiled astutely and concluded:

“However, I can decide nothing for the present . . . I must first examine the question seriously in a general sense and this young person in particular!”

Attended by bonzelings bearing big lanterns to light their road, His Holiness the Grand Prior and the bonze adjourned to the building which served as porter’s lodge.

The lovely Chti, who had taken refuge in a corner, was squatting humbly upon a footstool. With lowered lids and a modest and ingenuous air she appeared petrified in happy innocence.

At the very first glance His Holiness the Grand Prior conceived a most favorable opinion of this decorous young person.

He approached her and addressed her in a gentle voice:

“Be comforted, my child, you have nothing to fear in this pious monastery! . . .”

Chti slightly raised her lids and sketched a touching smile of gratitude.

Much moved, the Grand Prior murmured:

“What amiable distinction!”

He added aloud:

“Unfortunately, my child, our rule forbids us to offer you shelter in our holy abode! . . .”

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“Oh! How deeply I regret it! . . .” exclaimed Chti, with delightful naïveté, fixing on His Holiness the Grand Prior a gaze both suppliant and wheedling.

Losing his head, that pious person cried:

“Luckily, as I was observing just now to my dear brother, this severe rule admits of exceptions . . .”

He added with some embarrassment:

“If, for instance, madam, you would consent to being our cook? . . .”

And he paused, cut to the heart at being compelled by human conventions, to make such a suggestion to so remarkable a lady.

But without the slightest signs of annoyance Chti replied in caressing tones:

“I am at your orders, Excellency, you appear so good, so kind, so distinguished! . . .”

Out of respect for his Holy Person she dared not add: “and so handsome!” but her admiring glances gave clear expression to the profane thought.

Agreeably flattered, His Holiness the Grand Prior began to simper:

“How deeply I regret being compelled to bend before rules that are doubtless of undue severity! But have no anxiety, my child, regarding your lot; your kitchen duties will be of the pleasantest; you will neither peel vegetables, gut fowls, nor wash dishes. . . . You will only be allotted such light tasks as, for example, bringing to my bedside a little hot,

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well-seasoned broth to strengthen me before I go to sing the Sunrise Prayer!"

At these words the lovely Chti assumed an ecstatic expression, and bowing gracefully she affirmed: "I am your Holiness' most humble servant!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Li Pi Tchou and the lovely Chti found themselves reunited in the kitchens of the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds.

All decent appearances were thus preserved in the eyes of the profane.

The good monks were at liberty to offer a refuge to an unhappy couple, and was it not moreover an excellent way of acquiring servants without having to give them wages? . . . What truly discriminating charity! . . .

Actually the husband and wife occupied very different positions.

Chti, highly favored, was merely expected, as had been promised, to carry a little hot, well-seasoned broth to His Holiness the Grand Prior, as soon as he awoke, previously to his going forth at dawn to sing the Sunrise Prayer.

She acquitted herself of this task with an engaging elegance that was much appreciated by her gallant employer.

At all other times she was free to wander at will in the vast precincts of the monastery.

She would sometimes remain piously prostrated before the Buddhas of the Temple, admiring the serenity with which they contemplated their umbili-

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cus; or she would sometimes mingle with the crowds of visitors and examine with a curiosity tinged with fear the devils in the Gallery of Torments.

Then, after a brief visit to the menagerie of monsters, she would seek the glades of the park, in the center of which towered the pavilion of His Holiness the Grand Prior.

Having listened to the song of the phœnix and lyre-birds and admired the blue peacocks spreading their tails, she would quietly draw near to the lake which was overlooked by the windows of the pavilion.

There, for hours at a time, she would amuse herself by throwing rice to the strange goldfish that rose to the surface and stared at her with their monstrous eyes; and while she was engaged in this innocent pastime His Holiness the Grand Prior, lifting the bamboo blind which shaded his veranda, paused in his pious meditations in order to admire a charming springtime.

From a distance he would bestow on the lovely Chti a gesture of benediction to which she did not appear indifferent.

While this delightful person thus adorned the monotony of the cloister, her unhappy spouse, for his part, endured a pitiable existence.

At dawn, armed with a large broom, Li Pi Tchou swept the filth from the kitchens; after which he scrubbed them and was subsequently enabled to dry his breeches by lighting the stoves.

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Later he scaled fish, plucked and drew poultry and peeled vegetables.

Finally, he devoted the remainder of the day to his chief occupation of washing up and drying crockery.

Towards evening he was graciously permitted to seek his daily pittance among the remains of food which he was given to throw on the muck-heap; and he was even conceded the privilege of preparing it according to his fancy.

But Li Pi Tchou would indeed have been ungrateful had he complained of his benefactors.

Did he not owe them his life? What would have become of him, abandoned in the forest, with his bleeding feet and buttocks?

Whereas, now with the help of the ointments with which the good religious had dressed his wounds they had healed sufficiently to allow of his performing his innumerable duties without undue suffering.

True, he still wore the rags bestowed upon him by the Khonghouses, and thus tattered, his crown ill shaven around his shaggy pigtail, his features drawn, his eye wandering and his underlip drooping, he presented a sufficiently piteous appearance.

His scholar's hands, of which he had been so proud, were deformed like those of a coolie, and despite his anguished care he had broken, one by one, his aristocratic nails.

None the less, with incredible irresponsibility, he still congratulated himself upon having retained a

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virility from which he no longer reaped the smallest advantage.

For every evening at nightfall, by order of His Holiness the Grand Prior, the lovely Chti repaired to an isolated pavilion of which he jealously retained the key. There she slept in security under his pious care.

As for Li Pi Tchou, after one anguished glance towards his spouse, he went off to pass the night with the great Buddhist bell of the monastery.

This bell was suspended at the height of a man, beneath an arched roof supported by heavy pillars.

A horizontal beam, hung by ropes from a species of scaffolding, could be set in motion by a man's arm, and would swing against the enormous bell, evoking deep muffled vibrations which could be heard throughout the countryside.

Li Pi Tchou, who was expected to do without sleep, was invested with the majestic function of night ringer. He had been pleasantly warned that he would be flogged till the blood ran if he forgot to mark the hours of prayer, to give the alarm in event of fire and to ring in any case from time to time in order to scare off robbers or evil spirits.

Li Pi Tchou's repose therefore was confined to dozing, crouched upon a little stool beside the big bell.

Many times in the night he rose conscientiously and set the great beam in motion; then, at dawn, he consecrated his ebbing strength to ringing in the

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Early Prayers, before wearily resuming his daily work as coolie.

This painful existence was obviously not calculated to enliven his spirits, nor did it improve his complexion which was now assuming the tint of yellow ivory.

One morning, as he was painfully regaining the kitchens, he beheld the lovely Chti, who, with a gracious air invited him to wash the bowl that had held His Holiness the Grand Prior's morning broth.

Li Pi Tchou gave sudden vent to a deep groan; not at sight of the bowl, which he was in the habit of washing, but at beholding a splendid pearl necklace which undoubtedly enhanced the loveliness of the charming Chti's swanlike neck.

Despite the stupor induced by his endless labors, he had retained sufficient intelligence to comprehend without further proof, the new misfortune that assailed him.

Summoning such energy as remained to him, he protested indignantly.

"Madam, you already wear upon your finger the Grand Tartar's ring, on your arm the bracelet of the Khonghouse Chief! And now, to whom am I to ascribe the shameful jewel that dishonors your throat? . . ."

But Chti, whose adventures had roused her spirit, merely cast upon her ragged spouse a glance of disdain.

Li Pi Tchou insisted:

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"I have nevertheless a right, madam, it appears to me, to some sort of explanation!"

And as she remained mute and contemptuous, he reminded her in melancholy accents:

"Ah, madam, do you forget the profound love which I bear you? . . ."

At these words she started and exclaimed haughtily:

"A pretty sort of love! And in what manner, pray, have you led me to appreciate its advantages? . . . Since we started on our travels, what pleasure have you given me? . . ."

But Li Pi Tchou interrupted her, misunderstanding her and much moved:

"I am always ready to demonstrate to you all the ardor that consumes my heart!"

Chti smiled satirically:

"Really . . . I am overwhelmed . . . your brilliant appearance convinces me that I should consider myself the proudest and happiest of women! . . ."

Annoyed, Li Pi Tchou rejoined with some warmth:

"Your mockery, madam, is cruel! Do you then forget that in order to remain to you entire, I forewent all the advantages offered me by one of the most esteemed of official positions! . . ."

But Chti once more interrupted him with arrogance:

"Certainly, you showed a culpable frivolity in renouncing fortune, public esteem and a respectable

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position secured to your old age. . . . But what have you gained by doing so?"

Li Pi Tchou protested:

"Was it not for you, madam, and for you alone that I sacrificed everything? . . ."

And he continued his unseemly lamentations.

The lovely Chti was beginning to feel with some irritation that her worthy husband whose nature was doubtless soured, was unduly insistent in reproaching her with his misfortunes.

She observed drily:

"Is it my fault if your regrettable spirit of independence, your vulgar predilection for material pleasures, in fact, to put it plainly, your animal instincts have led you to reject the wise counsels of your venerable father? . . . And besides, I should be glad if you would show me any reason why I should be grateful to you for having desired to preserve your pitiable virility? . . . Were you so much as capable of protecting me from the violence of the Grand Tartar or the Khonghouses? . . . It was I on the contrary who preserved *your* life! . . . It is thanks to me if the good monks consent to endure your repulsive presence! . . . And you would now suggest, in deference to your idiotic jealousy that I should gracefully decline all the kindnesses bestowed upon us by these excellent bonzes in general and more particularly by His Holiness the Grand Prior? . . . Such a proceeding on my part would be as foolish as it would be basely ungrateful! . . . The shameful

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misery in which you wallow must surely have turned your brain, or you would hardly have the irresponsibility to entertain such unjustifiable pretensions? . . .”

And the lovely Chti contemplated her foolish husband with a glance both baleful and contemptuous.

But Li Pi Tchou, justly indignant at the ingratitude with which he was cruelly baited by his undutiful spouse, experienced a moment of revolt.

Forgetting that he was no longer in that ancestral home wherein, both feared and respected, he had held undisputed sway as son of the Grand Eunuch, he exclaimed furiously:

“A truce to these idle discussions! . . . After all, by Buddha, madam, you are my wife, and I shall know how to enforce my legitimate rights! . . .”

Beside himself, he began to storm, affronting the majesty of the vast kitchens.

In the midst of all this who should appear but His Holiness the Grand Prior, bent upon his customary and careful inspection of the kitchen premises.

He beheld the miserable Li Pi Tchou, yelling and gesticulating in a truly ridiculous manner, to which the lovely Chti, calmly contemptuous, offered no reply beyond a disdainful shrug of the shoulders.

Much astonished, His Holiness the Grand Prior, frowning, muttered between clenched teeth:

“Is this ragged rascal presuming to be jealous, that he raises his voice in such a manner?”

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Approaching Li Pi Tchou, he fixed upon him a severe gaze, inquiring in tones of authority:

"What are these stormy sounds that disturb in so incongruous a manner the quietude of our sacred abode? Have you, by any chance, sir, cause for dissatisfaction?"

And crossing his arms upon his breast he majestically awaited a reply.

Li Pi Tchou had felt all his audacity melt away at the stately appearance of His Holiness the Grand Prior. He signaled despairingly to the lovely Chti, imploring her to save him from further humiliation.

His Holiness the Grand Prior resumed:

"Well, sir, have you made up your mind to speak?"

Trembling in every limb the unfortunate son of the Grand Eunuch made a profound bow and humbly babbled:

"I can only declare myself perfectly satisfied; I await your Excellency's commands."

CHAPTER TWELVE

HIS HOLINESS THE GRAND PRIOR, bearer of the literary title of "Profundity and Meditation," had summoned to a learned and pious conclave all the worthy religious of the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds.

The subject of their grave deliberations was moreover of the highest importance: it was the question of the resources of the Sacred Abode, which decreased from day to day in a lamentable manner.

The principal cause of the trouble was, alas, only too well known: disastrous ideas of independence and skepticism had been disseminated in China by imprudent scholars whose minds had been poisoned by the perusal of evil books printed by the pale-face Barbarians.

The most regrettable incredulity had arisen to reinforce the already deplorable avarice of the country folk and of the population of the small provincial towns.

Such a state of affairs called for immediate attention, and every bonze was invited to suggest an efficient remedy.

His Holiness the Grand Prior "Profundity and Meditation" had opened the meeting with a touching little address:

"My dear brethren," he had exclaimed, unfolding

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his long wing-like sleeves, "my spirit yearns to soar towards a better world. It is cruelly wounded by the terrible realization that spiritual decomposition has assailed the souls of the erstwhile faithful! . . . But of what use are our lamentations, our appeals or even our prayers? . . . Undoubtedly Heaven hears them, but the evil-doers remain deaf to our protests! . . .

"Now it is obvious that pending our attainment of a blessed reincarnation, we are constrained to live, to struggle and to suffer! . . . Our condition is truly painful and our mission on earth, one of laborious endurance! . . . But we must not let ourselves be discouraged, my dear brethren! . . . Let each one of us collect himself, and summon all his energy and ingenuity. . . . Your spiritual father, the Grand Prior 'Profundity and Meditation,' asks and awaits your counsels! . . ."

Having uttered the foregoing exhortation in tones of deep emotion, the worthy superior joined with his good monks in a close examination of the ways and means of the Monastery.

They began by considering exterior resources: the begging monks were no longer welcomed by any save elderly spinsters who besieged them with childish tales and gave but meager alms in return for the patience with which the brothers endured their garrulity.

The exorcists, however, still reaped some success, traveling to distant farms for the purpose of banish-

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ing evil spirits which troubled the peace of households and flocks by their restless desire for reincarnation. Nevertheless, the proceeds from their labors were far from adequate to the balancing of the budget.

Births, marriages and more especially deaths, still continued more by tradition than belief to be celebrated with the pious collaboration of the bonzes. But families were becoming progressively less generous in their remuneration of the celebrants.

Their chief source of income remained obviously those public ceremonies whereby, with due pomp and circumstance, the demons of cholera and plague were exorcised or the spirits of wind and water invoked in the interests of the harvest.

But the unfortunate bonzes were compelled to share the proceeds of all such ceremonies with the mandarins, who held the right to control both the order and the results of these pious manifestations.

At the conclusion therefore of this primary inquiry, His Holiness the Grand Prior "Profundity and Meditation" sadly remarked:

"The external situation, without being desperate, is the reverse of brilliant!"

He then turned to consider the internal resources of the community: the poor boxes which served to receive alms were placed in due prominence and numbers throughout the monastery from the foot of the altars to the uttermost corners of corridors and courtyards. None the less, the faithful frequently ap-

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peared unable to perceive them. True, certain simpletons made a farcical practice of depositing therein prayers and requests addressed to every conceivable Buddha! But what possible use could be found for scraps of paper thus incongruously deposited by credulous fools?

Did they expect the Superior of the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds to act as secretary to innumerable Buddhas in order to supply answers to such conundrums?

His Holiness the Grand Prior had quite other pious preoccupations! . . . At the very thought of such presumption he laughed grimly in a manner which somewhat dismayed the simpler of his brethren.

He proceeded to discuss the Gallery of Torments and the Menagerie of Monsters, admitting with some satisfaction that these two chambers of horrors retained a fairly high reputation throughout the province. A great number of visitors, actuated by curiosity, continued to assemble, and many, appalled by the vision of the devils or terrified at the sight of the monsters, experienced a temporary repentance very profitable to the monks who escorted them and explained the future punishments to which they would inevitably be condemned.

Finally His Holiness the Grand Prior, turning to a more gracious topic, expressed a lively gratitude to the great Buddha of Fecundity, squatting nobly upon his lotus flower at the gates of the temple.

This handsome Buddha of gilt wood, like other

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Buddhas, was represented ecstatically contemplating his navel.

All the sterile women of the province, threatened with ignominious repudiation by their outraged husbands, came in flocks to invoke the aid of this estimable statue.

With pious and hopeful hands they caressed the image of fecundity, and the poor box placed in proximity to this idol was ceaselessly filled with generous offerings.

His Holiness the Grand Prior frankly admitted:

"That Buddha, my dear brethren, is the only one who stands between us and ruin!"

He went on to discuss several other small Buddhas of lesser importance, and having thus conscientiously exhausted the entire resources—exterior and interior—of the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds, His Holiness the Grand Prior "Profundity and Meditation" concluded gravely:

"And now, my dear brethren, I await your suggestions."

Each monk in turn expressed his opinion, but the remedies or improvements proposed offered small hopes of any great results.

His Holiness the Grand Prior, seriously perturbed, muttered to himself:

"Alas, what foolishness! . . . What distressing poverty of imagination! . . . Am I entirely surrounded by pious imbeciles?"

At length a monk of austere appearance, answer-

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ing to the literary name of "Radiance and Felicity," declaimed in sepulchral tones:

"In my opinion we require, in order to dispel the torpor and indifference of the herd, a rare and magnificent spectacle, designed to attract the curious, to kindle imaginations, to make the timid tremble and to stir the souls of the populace! . . ."

Beneath his beetling brows, his fanatical eyes blazed between their narrow lids.

His Holiness the Grand Prior observed:

"My dear brother 'Radiance and Felicity,' your eloquence is invariably stimulating, but I should be glad to hear you define your project!"

Whereupon the dear brother, frowning terribly, resumed his sepulchral discourse:

"It is needful that one of us should be sufficiently pure to allow his body to be with due pomp consumed to ashes."

And he added in order to emphasize his point:

"You all know, my dear brethren, that it is the apotheosis of holiness to be thus solemnly and publicly incinerated. . . . You are well aware that in former times the greatest Saints disappeared in such wise from this baser earth, consumed by the flames of their own virtue! . . . Since those times, whenever an eminent religious in a spirit of pious imitation has allowed himself to be thus cremated, the Heavens have rewarded him by admission to the rank of lesser Buddhas, and his Monastery, for which he earned a legitimate reputation of holiness, reaped a

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harvest in the reawakened ardor of the faithful!"

Transported by the grandeur of his proposal, the monk "Radiance and Felicity" continued to declaim:

"Which of you, my dear brethren, is sufficiently pure to embrace this impressive cremation? . . . I can promise the future Saint that he shall be burnt in great pomp amid an admiring crowd, and that his ashes, piously collected, will be cherished by us as venerable relics!"

But to his deep astonishment no enthusiastic voice arose among the audience in response to his moving appeal.

Justly pained by this silence, His Holiness the Grand Prior "Profundity and Meditation" rallied to the assistance of the orator, declaring:

"My dear brethren, I am aware that modesty is a great virtue, but on this occasion I am prepared to absolve in advance from the sin of presumption that one of you who will claim the privilege of cremation."

But as the pious congregation continued to maintain the most discreet silence, His Holiness the Grand Prior, unwilling to abandon the excellent suggestion of the good monk "Radiance and Felicity," announced in conciliatory tones:

"In order that such a ceremony should be truly agreeable to Heaven, it is obvious that the future Saint should be in a condition of perfect spiritual innocence! An idea has therefore occurred to me, my dear brethren, which will perhaps meet with your

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approval. The innocent whom we require is actually at our disposal. He was brought to us not long ago in a pitiable condition in the donkey-cart of one of our good begging monks. . . . Since then, some among you have had the meritorious charity to anoint with curative unguents his damaged buttocks and the equally impaired soles of his feet, in such wise that he is now practically cured! . . . Happily, however, he still retains that silly and suffering expression that appeals to Heaven! . . . The name of this predestined being is, I believe, Li Pi Tchou; and since he is now able to stand, he is doubtless employed in washing our kitchen crockery. . . . He will assuredly be only too glad to abandon that humble employment in order to become a Saint; we are in fact conferring an incredible honor on his humility."

Whereupon, His Holiness the Grand Prior, after acknowledging the unanimous approbation of the good monks, gave order that the inoffensive Li Pi Tchou should be summoned from the kitchens.

The poor man soon arrived, much alarmed at the thought of appearing before so venerable a company.

He prostrated himself in according to the rites, after which he arose and awaited their pleasure in the humblest of attitudes.

His Holiness the Grand Prior, however, with signal kindness, deigned to remark his timid presence:

"You need have no anxiety, sir," he assured him, with an amiable smile. "Not only have you nothing to fear, but your heart will shortly be flooded with

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the purest delight, since we have resolved to open to you the very gates of Heaven!"

Bewildered, Li Pi Tchou contemplated His Holiness the Grand Prior with a certain alarm. The words addressed to him, despite their amiable tenor, conveyed no sense to his understanding.

The Eminent Superior resumed:

"We have in our pious council determined to call down the divine benedictions upon our Sacred House; to this end we intend with great pomp and amid the solemn devotions of the faithful summoned from all the province, to inaugurate the cremation of a singularly privileged being. . . . Undoubtedly there are to be found among our honorable assembly ascetics sufficiently pure and virtuous to merit such distinction. . . . But we wish to adorn the edifying ceremony with a spirit of praiseworthy humility. . . . It is needful, in order completely to satisfy the Heavens, that this sacrifice should retain a character of entire innocence and simplicity. . . . It therefore becomes indispensable, with such an end in view, to discover a poor man of humble condition who will allow himself to be incinerated without drawing therefrom a culpable and arrogant gratification! We have thus," concluded His Holiness the Grand Prior, smiling graciously upon the distracted Li Pi Tchou, "summoned you! You have, sir, if you will forgive my saying so, an appearance miserable enough and a sufficiently simple expression for your cremation to be agreeable to Heaven; and I feel convinced that

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you will not indulge in any culpable pride at being the object of so distinguished a choice! . . .”

Li Pi Tchou, if the truth must be told, preserved a touching humility and displayed no evidence of any misplaced arrogance.

A prey to the most violent emotion, his teeth chattered and he trembled in every limb.

His Holiness the Grand Prior further remarked in unctuous tones:

“Your ashes, moreover, will be piously collected and will repose in a place of honor among other respectable relics exposed in our Temple for the veneration of the faithful!”

However, at the prospect of being roasted alive, the unfortunate Li Pi Tchou regained a thread of voice wherewith to murmur:

“I am infinitely grateful to His Holiness the Grand Prior for all his kindness. . . . But I feel myself a poor creature quite unworthy of such a honor. My spirit in particular is very far from having attained the necessary purity!”

And he proceeded to accuse himself in desperation of every profane thought that had ever soiled his consciousness.

The Grand Prior reassured him with indulgence:

“Your confession only does you honor, my dear sir; and in any case you need have no such scruples. . . . The holy fire, I can solemnly assure you, will be well able to purify your spirit!”

Li Pi Tchou, however, in no wise convinced of his

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state of grace, continued to deny his suitability as the chosen of Heaven, and remained firm in his refusal to become an object of universal adoration.

He had not even the decency to call to mind the considerable advantages which would accrue to his benefactors or the blessings which his sacrifice would cause heaven to shower down upon the Sacred House that had so charitably sheltered him.

Indignant at so notable an ingratitude allied with such revolting unbelief, His Holiness the Grand Prior ended by declaring:

“Your modesty becomes signally misplaced! . . . The greatest virtues gain nothing from being ostentatiously displayed! . . . In the interests of your future salvation we shall do you a gentle violence! . . .”

And as Li Pi Tchou the incorrigible tried yet again to protest, His Holiness the Grand Prior glared at him and announced:

“Willing or unwilling, sir, you shall be roasted! . . .”

Disengaging his long sleeve and extending his arm, he pointed to the door and sternly commanded:

“Begone! O Being of little faith! . . . Get hence and meditate before your ovens while awaiting the honor of yourself entering the fire!”

The miserable Li Pi Tchou, dazed and distracted, obeyed without further protest and fled back to the kitchens. With a horrified gaze he now contemplated the ducks slowly browning before the fire, and envied their luck in not being roasted living.

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While he was plunged in these lugubrious meditations, the lovely Chti, smiling as always, passed that way.

Entirely forgetful of his dignity, so great was his fear of being burnt, the wretched Li Pi Tchou flung himself at her little feet.

He was far from daring to address any further reproaches to his dear wife; very humbly he implored her to intercede in his favor with His Holiness the Grand Prior.

The lovely Chti drew herself up with arrogance.

Finally, however, after a thousand appeals, she condescended to try yet again to save the life of this melancholy spouse.

But this time the matter was far too serious for her to entertain any optimistic hopes of success.

And Li Pi Tchou, tortured by the most horrible apprehensions, was left in petrified contemplation of his ovens.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE lovely Chti had certainly undertaken no easy task in attempting to dissuade His Holiness the Grand Prior from his determined intention of roasting the simple Li Pi Tchou for the edification of the faithful.

The good Superior continued to regard this project as excellent and above all as profitable; he had no wish to renounce it out of deference to an impractical benevolence.

The utmost concession that Chti was able to secure was the postponement of the cremation to the most auspicious day of the following moon.

This much she obtained by arousing some misgivings in the mind of His Holiness the Grand Prior as to what His Excellency the Grand Eunuch Li Pi Siao might have to say if they roasted his son without having the courtesy to advise him of their intention.

Perhaps Li Pi Siao, in spite of having banished from his house so futile a scion, might yet cherish for him a secret affection!

On the other hand, he might quite possibly be nourishing a sincere indignation against his unworthy son. In which circumstances would it not be an insult to him publicly to elevate to the rank of minor

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saint a monster who had spurned the traditions of filial piety?

In either case, was it not preferable to solicit the advice of His Excellency Li Pi Siao, who was sufficiently powerful to make the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds pay dearly for any neglect of the proprieties where he himself was concerned?

His Holiness the Grand Prior, giving due consideration to the subtlety of judgment displayed by the lovely Chti, was bound to admit that she might not be altogether mistaken.

As a means of discreetly conveying his intention to the eminent castrate of the Violet Town, His Holiness the Grand Prior was fortunately possessed of a valuable ambassador in the person of his niece who had had the immense honor to be selected as one of the eighty and one concubines of His Majesty the Holy Man, Son of Heaven.

This amiable damsel was none other than the distinguished and youthful beauty who answered officially to the literary name of "Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring" and who for practical purposes figured as number 19 in the private register of Li Pi Siao.

His Holiness the Grand Prior whose constant interest in this niece was proportionate to her possible usefulness in case of need, was well-informed of the above details. He had further ascertained that Miss Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring had gained a certain influence over the Holy Man, by reason of

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the modest deportment and reserve of manner that she had acquired as the result of the excellent and pious education formerly decreed for her by her worthy uncle.

Being in no uncertainty as to the spirit of family zeal which must actuate his niece, His Holiness the Grand Prior lost no time in writing her a friendly letter, in which, after a thousand compliments and good wishes, he prayed her to approach the Grand Eunuch with the utmost discretion and to endeavor to ascertain his views in the matter of his son's cremation.

Awaiting a reply which he trusted would be favorable, His Holiness advised Li Pi Tchou that his incineration would be provisionally postponed. In the meantime, as a further token of his kindness he informed Li Pi Tchou that he would in future be entrusted with the important duty of leading to pasture the swine belonging to the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds.

In the solitude of the pastures he would be at liberty to rarefy his spirit by profitable meditations and thus prepare himself worthily for his elevation as a lesser Buddha.

At the same time, His Holiness the Grand Prior made it charitably clear that Li Pi Tchou must cherish no hopes of indulging his well-known modesty by an escape from the glorious future; in such an event he could not fail to fall into the hands of the Grand

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Tartar, who patroled the highroads or of the Khong-houses, who swarmed in the district.

These gentlemen having been informed of the impending ceremony, and of the fact that a portion of the proceeds would be divided between them and the local mandarins, were naturally interested in its consummation.

Li Pi Tchou, caught in the attempt to escape, would be cruelly punished; an incident which would in no wise affect his being subsequently roasted.

Thus exhorted and encouraged along the right road Li Pi Tchou received from the exalted hands of His Holiness the Grand Prior an elegant crook wherewith to control the progress of his swine.

Finally, as a parting favor, he was permitted to offer his wife humble thanks and to bid her farewell.

In a pitiable condition, Li Pi Tchou, still further embarrassed by his crook, sought the lovely Chti for a final interview.

Overjoyed at having accomplished her deliverance from an inopportune husband, by means of a good action, Chti received him with pleasant condescension.

But far from expressing satisfaction at the postponement of his cremation, the foolish Li Pi Tchou gave vent to untimely recriminations.

Justly irritated, the lovely Chti exclaimed:

"I *might* have expected this. . . . You should be only too thankful after deserving decapitation by the Grand Tartar or impaling by the Konghouses, to be merely selected for pious cremation by His Holiness

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the Grand Prior. . . . And moreover you are to be allowed by the gracious master ample time wherein to repent and purify yourself in order that the ceremony may be fully efficacious in qualifying you for uncontested elevation to the rank of a lesser Buddha! . . . An honor which you in no wise deserve! . . . In the meantime, control yourself decently, and display your gratification at being allowed to tend the pigs of these excellent religious; their permitting you to do so is a grateful expression of their confidence in your integrity!"

But Li Pi Tchou, in no way convinced by her eloquence, continued his complaining.

The lovely Chti resumed:

"You are indeed utterly without initiative! . . . It was hardly worth while to make such a point of retaining your virility! . . . And where do I come in? . . . But for your idiotic spirit of disobedience and independence, I should have remained the most virtuous and respected of wives. . . . I should have remained decently concealed in the bosom of the family abode; and I should faithfully have accomplished my maternal duties towards your son. . . . Your venerable father Li Pi Siao would have loaded me with presents and with every kind of indulgence; and you yourself would, I should hope, have done likewise. . . . Finally, after a long life of happiness and comfort, I should have been assured of repose in a handsome coffin among those of the Li and of the enjoyment of Ancestral worship! . . . And not only

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have you, by your culpable in consequence, bereft me of all this happiness, but you it is who actually venture to complain! . . . Is such effrontery credible!"

And here the lovely Chti permitted herself to shed two small tears of genuine emotion.

Li Pi Tchou abased himself with humility. His wife had undeniably some cause for complaint! And he was about to tender her his sincere regrets, when she interrupted him abruptly:

"I will hear no more! . . . But for me, you would already have been roasted! . . . But you are as ungrateful towards me as you were towards your venerable father! . . . Leave me, sir; go, herd the swine of these excellent monks; and try to be less unworthy of the affection which I have been so weak as to retain for you."

Thereupon Chti turned her back, and refusing to listen to another word, she withdrew, making graceful use of her extended arms in order to balance the tottering progress of her exquisite little feet.

Li Pi Tchou gazed despairingly after the delicious spouse who had caused him such dire misfortune but whom he still so passionately loved.

Then resigning himself and leaning upon his crook he set off to tend the swine in the country that surrounded the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds.

None the less, pending the reply of the Grand Eunuch, the lovely Chti, who was not insensible to all pity for her miserable husband, risked one last appeal

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to His Holiness the Grand Prior, in order to save him from cremation.

She quite understood that that pious individual thoroughly approved the suggestion of the good monk "Radiance and Felicity," but she was equally convinced that the identity of the victim was immaterial so long as any victim was forthcoming.

She therefore conceived an excellent plan.

For several days she had been harassed by the misplaced jests of a hideous bonzeling, a little wretch employed every morning in dusting the faces of the devils in the Gallery of Torments.

Now, each time that the lovely Chti, trembling in every limb, came piously to seek among the devils a little emotion before going forth to divert herself among the glades of the park, the accursed bonzeling accosted her with scant civility, jeering at her terrors and repeating with derisive sniggers:

"These devils are of plaster and painted wood, my pretty one! . . ."

And he would add maliciously:

"But there are devils of flesh and blood which are much more worthy of fear!"

And he would point slyly to the pavilion of His Holiness the Grand Prior.

Scandalized by his blasphemous incivilities, Chti had at first sought to impose reasonable demeanor upon this graceless bonzeling; but he merely retaliated by putting out his tongue at her in a most discourteous manner.

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She therefore felt in all charity that it would be a good deed to secure the purification by fire of so detestable a young miscreant.

Slightly distorting the truth therefore, the lovely Chti, appearing much distressed, related her trouble to His Holiness the Grand Prior one morning, when, as was customary, she approached his bedside with a little warm and well-seasoned broth.

She explained the scandal:

"This little ruffianly bonzeling, your Holiness, pursues me with his attentions; and when I repulse him indignantly he insults me and puts out his tongue."

"He might do even worse," the Grand Prior remarked thoughtfully; but he added:

"I agree, however, that his conduct is more than unseemly; I will expel him from the Monastery after having him whipped until the blood runs!"

"But that will not suffice!" exclaimed Chti with some haste.

"What would you suggest as further punishment?" inquired the Grand Prior.

Then Chti, assuming a little air of contrition, declared hypocritically:

"It is not vengeance that I claim! But I am desirous of saving the soul of that bonzeling. I was thinking that if you would consent to his being roasted in my husband's stead, he would obtain purification by that means!"

His Holiness the Grand Prior was highly amused;

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"Your benevolence of spirit, madam, is admirable; that scoundrelly bonzeling would surely be moved to repentance if he knew of your generous intentions on his behalf. . . . But the little wretch is too impure of spirit and profane of thought to aspire to the honor of becoming a lesser Buddha! . . . His cremation would afford no gratification to Heaven; and what is more, I fear that such a young blasphemer might permit himself to create an appalling scandal before the assembled faithful: he would cry out, madam, and might even protest against your goodness in desiring him to achieve saintship. . . . And moreover, he has so sly an appearance that beholders would scarcely credit his purity and innocence. . . . I am sorry, madam, but I am afraid I cannot endorse your choice of a suitable candidate for edifying cremation."

Chti sighed with disappointment:

"Then you are absolutely determined that it is my poor husband who must let himself be roasted!"

And she assumed an air of pouting displeasure.

His Holiness the Grand Prior, who preferred to see her smiling, hastened to console her:

"You entirely misunderstand me, madam! . . . In order to please you, even in the face of the precarious financial situation of our Holy House, I have already consented to a postponement of the great ceremony until an auspicious day of the next moon! . . . That is in itself a considerable sacrifice that I have made! . . . But, for your sake I am prepared to go to even greater lengths! . . . I will therefore willingly ac-

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cept that your husband should procure a substitute, subject only to the condition that he should find one as simple looking as himself, which may not be by any means a very easy matter! . . .”

As he concluded he was rewarded by the dawning of a gracious smile upon the countenance of the lovely Chti.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IN anticipation of the great day upon which he would be piously roasted, Li Pi Tchou sadly drove his herd of swine before him through the fields.

Obedient to the exhortations of His Holiness the Grand Prior, he meditated upon his latter end, but without enthusiasm.

He envied the lot of his pigs, who, with rooting snouts, ambled peacefully along seeking their nourishment and giving no thought to their destinies.

More ragged than ever, Li Pi Tchou, with the help of his crook, ambled painfully after his beasts the livelong day; at nightfall he drove them into an old shed, and extended his own wretchedness at its doors, under the stars.

A bonzeling brought him disdainfully night and morning a bowl containing kitchen refuse, and to quench his thirst Li Pi Tchou was at liberty to select the least stagnant water of the less dirty of the ponds that ornamented the neighborhood.

Li Pi Tchou was thus preparing himself with laudable humility for sanctification in another world; a thought which should have been of comfort to him, had not his regrettable education as a scholar poisoned his spirit with a deplorable skepticism regarding pious practices.

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One morning, even wearier and more discouraged than usual, he was driving his pigs towards a pond where he desired to drink, when he met on the way another herd of swine, led by a tall and beardless young man, as listless and melancholy as himself.

Despite the fact that this herdsman was clad in garments almost as ragged as his own, Li Pi Tchou remarked in his manners and in his gestures a certain distinction which spoke of a higher station.

He must undeniably have received a good education since it was with all the complicated ceremonial of the most exquisite courtesy that he politely greeted the dilapidated Li Pi Tchou.

Not to be outdone in amiability, Li Pi Tchou, having correctly returned his salutations, remarked with courtly grace:

“Allow me to congratulate you, dear sir! . . . Your swine are larger, stronger, finer than mine; they have also a more distinguished appearance! . . .”

The young swineherd bowed and rejoined politely:

“Such a superiority, sir, should neither astonish nor distress you, since these are swine belonging to His Majesty the Holy Man!”

“Indeed?” replied Li Pi Tchou with tact, “why then, sir, in that case you are almost an official! . . .”

“Yes,” said the young man evasively, “I am still in the Imperial Service; but my status has been considerably reduced!”

And he gave vent to a long sigh, doubtless addressed to his more fortunate past.

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Seized with compassion and also actuated by curiosity, Li Pi Tchou resumed:

"Permit me, dear sir, to be guilty of a possible indiscretion. Your distinguished carriage, your exquisite politeness and the remarkable manner in which you express yourself lead me to suppose that your present state is both unjust and unmerited?"

The young man exclaimed with a courtly bow:

"I was just about to make the same inquiry, sir, and for the same reasons! But pray be the first to speak! . . . Afterwards we may try to find mutual consolation for our misfortunes."

"Since you permit it," answered Li Pi Tchou, "I will venture to inquire of you whether you will confide to me the nature of your employment before you became herdsman to the Holy Man's swine!"

"I herded his concubines," replied the young man with engaging simplicity. And he uttered another heartrending sigh.

Li Pi Tchou then realized the quality of his interlocutor, and much interested at the thought that he was in the presence of a disgraced eunuch from the Violet Town, he inquired:

"You were, of course, under the command of His Excellency Li Pi Siao?"

"Precisely, sir, and it was in fact His Excellency's decree that condemned me to this melancholy exile."

"And in what manner did such a mishap befall you?" asked the now deeply interested Li Pi Tchou.

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The young eunuch hesitated for a moment, but finally he declared:

"Since you appear to take so lively an interest in my ill fortune, I will endeavor to inform you of its cause, although such a recital must inevitably awaken the most painful memories."

And sighing yet again, he began:

"My disgrace, dear sir, befell me at the close of a delectable banquet, the last that I ever had the pleasure of enjoying. . . . His Excellency the Grand Eunuch Li Pi Siao had done me the honor of inviting me to his table; and I need not tell you that that table was well garnished."

"I can well believe it," said Li Pi Tchou sadly.

"Well, then, instead of lightheartedly appreciating the precious enjoyments of so remarkable a banquet, I allowed my spirit to stray into the most pernicious intoxication . . . and that drunkenness being of a melancholy nature despite the fact that I had achieved it by means of the lively roseate liquor of the Academicians, I had the immodesty, the tactlessness, the folly and the vulgarity to begin holding forth on the subject of women!"

"Had they then caused you to suffer?" cried Li Pi Tchou with interest.

The young eunuch smiled indulgently: "You forget my condition! . . . I was completely ignorant of them, at any rate as regards the commerce of love; but it was precisely of this fact that I was so unseemly as to complain!"

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"Were you not possibly mistaken?" interjected Li Pi Tchou, who was beginning to acquire a certain philosophy on the subject.

"I was indeed," rejoined the eunuch emphatically, "for since I was compelled to leave the Violet Town and to mix with commoner mortals, I have been able to realize how ridiculous were my regrets. . . . I have seen so many poor men the victims of the bitter temper, the insane jealousy, the misplaced coquetry, the shameless loquacity or at best the innate foolishness of their wives, that I have long since arrived at asking myself whether the most passionate ecstasies of love could ever make them oblivious, even for a moment, of their unceasing martyrdom."

"There is only one answer to that question, I can assure you," affirmed Li Pi Tchou sadly, and the young eunuch resumed without any surprise:

"I bow to your experience, sir, and moreover it tallies with the opinions of His Excellency Li Pi Siao. . . . Indignant at the stupidity which I displayed in regretting the pleasures of love while those of the table were so amply spread before me, my good master banished me straightway from his presence and exiled me to this dreary spot where you behold me herding swine instead of concubines!"

At the melancholy picture evoked by his own words, the eyes of the young and repentant eunuch filled with tears.

Touched by such genuine affliction, Li Pi Tchou would have wished to offer some consolation to this

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poor exile, the victim, like himself, of the wisdom of the venerable Li Pi Siao.

At length he said:

"Alas, my dear sir, my ill fortune eclipses your own. I also for a reason analogous to that which caused your banishment from the Violet Town, was likewise exiled by His Excellency the Grand Eunuch Li Pi Siao."

"What!" exclaimed the young herdsman, interrupting him with surprise; "Are we then colleagues, and you said nothing of it. . . . You must really excuse me for not having divined it sooner; but the quality of your voice surely has retained astonishing resonance."

Li Pi Tchou's smile was sad:

"I have expressed myself badly. . . . It is just because I foolishly refused to be admitted to your estimable estate that a host of disasters have overwhelmed me. . . . But where our ill fortune does present points of similarity apart from that of herding swine, is in the fact that the same judge smote us both with his severity for precisely the same offense.

"I also, dear sir, regretted women, or rather, what was even more foolish, one woman, my wife, in the presence of the Grand Eunuch; and in my case the impropriety was aggravated by the fact that I was also erring against filial obedience, since, as I should confess to you without delay, I am the unworthy son of the eminent Li Pi Siao!"

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The young eunuch contemplated Li Pi Tchou with pained astonishment:

"And you have come to this?"

"Yes, indeed," wailed Li Pi Tchou; "and my lot would yet be enviable were it not that I am destined to be piously roasted at a slow fire for the edification of the faithful on the very first auspicious day of the next moon; and that the ceremony is to be held with great pomp in the Court of Honor of the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds!"

"And is that also the fault of your wife?" inquired the young eunuch, full of compassion.

"Not exactly! . . ." answered Li Pi Tchou, "but it is all a consequence of the error which I committed because of her, when I refused to become an honorable functionary in order to consecrate myself to her deplorable charms!"

Then, seized with uncontrollable emotion, he raised his arms to heaven, and calling the young eunuch to witness he exclaimed:

"Ah, love! . . . my dear sir, love! . . . What incredible follies a man can utter and commit in the cause of love! What human and divine maledictions he can bring down upon his head! . . . To what sufferings, to what anguish, to what tortures he exposes himself by this dementia of soul! . . ."

And in a weary voice, Li Pi Tchou related all the misadventures which had already befallen him since he had been banished by his father, up to the last

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and most terrible calamity of being threatened with a solemn incineration.

The young eunuch admitted with concern that Li Pi Tchou's history had undoubtedly been even more tragic than his own.

Then he inquired:

"Is there no possible remedy to so dire a predicament?"

Li Pi Tchou shook his head:

"There remain to me two very faint hopes; but how ephemeral! Nevertheless, such as they are, I am bound to admit that I owe them to my wife. . . . If the truth must be told, loath as I am to evoke so horrible an intimacy, my wife is on the best of terms with His Holiness the Grand Prior 'Profundity and Meditation.'"

"Indeed!" exclaimed the young eunuch thoughtlessly! . . . "Could not she presume upon that intimacy to the extent of obtaining my admission to the monastery in the capacity of singer, or of choir master to the bonzelings? Such an occupation would in any case be an improvement upon that of herding swine."

"Sir, you distract me from my theme!" observed poor Li Pi Tchou; and he resumed:

"My wife, being as I said in high favor with His Holiness the Grand Prior, has persuaded him to delay my cremation until my father, duly advised of the pious suggestion, shall have given his permission for its accomplishment."

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"Then you may yet retain a very lively hope," said the young eunuch more cheerfully.

"Not so, my dear sir, as I have already said, my hopes on this point are very faint indeed. Too well I know the firmness of my father's character; and you have yourself experienced its rigors! . . ."

With a profound sigh Li Pi Tchou added:

"My second ground for hope is even more uncertain! . . . My wife, in a conversation doubtless regrettably intimate but of undeniable usefulness, was able to obtain from His Holiness the Grand Prior information regarding his real views on the subject of the Pious Ceremony. That eminent person is bent upon its success, as likely to call down upon his Sacred House blessings from Heaven in addition to considerable material profits, but he attaches a very minor importance to the identity of the patient! . . ."

Having paused a moment in order to regain breath, Li Pi Tchou concluded:

"Thus you would be doing me a very great service were you able to direct me to some poor man of my estate who would be willing to become in my stead a lesser Buddha in the next world!"

The young eunuch bent a distressed gaze on Li Pi Tchou.

"I should be only too happy, sir, to render you this trifling service; but, alas, in these days of deplorable unbelief, it appears to me impossible to discover any being, however miserable his condition, who will consent willingly to being roasted alive in

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order to become a Saint! . . . Day by day, piety is disappearing from the countryside, a fact which, for your sake, sir, I deeply lament! . . .”

Panic-stricken at this statement of a too obvious truth, Li Pi Tchou broke forth once more into pitiable lamentations.

The young eunuch, much affected, attempted to console him:

“Allow me to help you in your search for the required simpleton! . . . You have my word that I will engage my very soul in your cause! . . .”

Li Pi Tchou, faintly reassured, babbled:

“I am grateful to you, sir, for your kindness of heart! . . .”

Whereupon, his throat being dry from much speaking, wailing and sighing, he extended himself upon his stomach with such dignity as he could muster, and together with his swine proceeded to quench his thirst in the fetid waters of the pond.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DESPITE the utter hopelessness of his task, Li Pi Tchou had set himself to search for the poverty-stricken individual who would consent to being roasted in his stead.

The young eunuch, with unswerving devotion, kept his promise of aiding him in this enterprise. But it was no easy matter.

The countryside revealed a certain number of ancient beggars, poor also of intellect, who dragged out a miserable existence, but not one of these could be aroused, even by the concerted eloquence of the two swineherds regarding the beauty of a pious cremation, to an enthusiasm productive of useful results. One and all promised quite simply to attend the ceremony, in the hopes that under the influence of the general emotion, pious hands would bestow upon them some trifling alms. They repeated with conviction:

“It is not at all a bad idea on the part of His Holiness the Grand Prior! . . .”

But such pleasant remarks were of no assistance to the unfortunate Li Pi Tchou, who watched with terror the passing of the hours that lay between him and the auspicious day upon which the magnificent ceremony was to be performed.

Was he doomed to fail in his search for a future

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saint? What a heartrending skepticism had invaded the countryside, rendering it possible so utterly to disdain the promise of celestial joys!

Li Pi Tchou, distraught, implored the young eunuch:

"I beseech you; time presses; is it really impossible to discover among so many unfortunates one who will consent to leave the sorrows of this ungrateful earth by a road that will ensure him so marvelous a future?"

"Alas!" replied the castrate, "were it merely a question of decapitation, we might yet entertain some hopes of discovering a candidate and of luring him with the promise of a handsome coffin; but to be burnt alive at a slow fire—have you thought of it, my dear sir?"

"I think of nothing else," answered Li Pi Tchou in lugubrious accents.

"Forgive me!" exclaimed the thoughtless one. . . . "You know how deeply I compassionate your anguish!"

And leaning upon his crook, the young eunuch subsided into profound reflection.

Trembling, Li Pi Tchou inquired:

"Well, then! Has any idea occurred to you? . . ."

And he prayed that his companion might be endowed with a fertile imagination. At length, after a protracted pause, the young eunuch exclaimed:

"Console yourself, my dear sir! . . . I have perhaps found what you require! . . . I am, in fact, at

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a loss to understand why I did not think of it sooner! . . .”

He proceeded to speak with enthusiasm of an ancient hermit who managed to exist by unknown means in the depths of a deserted forest.

“We cannot both visit him,” said he, “as our swine must not be left untended, but I will, if you wish it, tend your herd and mine on the edge of the forest, so that you may be at liberty to seek and confer with the hermit.”

And he repeated with conviction:

“There is every chance of success! . . . The hermit, to lead such an existence, must be as pious as he is original! . . .”

Li Pi Tchou, filled with hope, thanked his companion effusively, and they both hastened to drive their beasts to the borders of the forest wherein dwelt the hermit.

Having confided his pigs to the young eunuch, Li Pi Tchou, buoyed with hope, started to force a way through the tangled undergrowth of the wood.

After much painful effort he reached a clearing in which he perceived a tiny hut half buried in the offal and rubbish of ages, and Li Pi Tchou doubted not that this was the hermit’s pious habitation.

His heart thumping with emotion, he advanced to the entrance of the hut, and gently lifting an old rag that did duty as a door, threw a hasty and eager glance within.

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In a far corner he beheld the hermit, wallowing in filthy litter like a wild hog.

Disturbed in his meditations the hermit uttered a hoarse grunt which did not fail to intimidate his visitor. None the less, despite the surly reception, Li Pi Tchou, spurred by the terror of being roasted, advanced courageously into the lair.

He was met by so overwhelming a stench that he thought he must suffocate, and he remained stationary, gasping for breath, while he contemplated with growing alarm the strange master of the house.

Hairy, tattered and lousy, the hermit scarcely retained a human semblance; in his filthy face two minute glittering eyes squinted furiously inwards at his swelled and broken nose, while two enormously swollen lips resembling a snout moved incessantly, forming the circular orifice from which proceeded those indistinct sounds that had so much alarmed his guest.

However, it being a case of life and death, Li Pi Tchou resisted his impulse of immediate flight.

He even controlled himself sufficiently to commence the various bows, salutes and genuflexions expected of true courtesy.

Still wallowing in his hovel, the solitary continued to grunt in furious expression of displeasure at the disturbance of his torpor, while Li Pi Tchou, conquering his emotion, managed to stammer:

"My Reverend Father, I beg of you to excuse me for having troubled your majestic solitude by my

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unworthy presence! . . . But attracted hither by your renowned piety and virtue, I thought it only right to come and inform you of a unique opportunity which has arisen whereby you can without further delay become a genuine Buddha! . . .”

Losing his head, he added abruptly:

“Would you not thankfully be cremated?”

The hermit ceased grunting for an instant, and fixing Li Pi Tchou with an idiotic stare, enunciated painfully:

“I do not understand! . . .”

“I will explain myself,” said Li Pi Tchou hastily; and with the eloquence of self-interest he proceeded to describe in full detail the beauties of a pious cremation.

He pointed out graciously:

“You would be piously roasted with the utmost pomp in the presence of an immense concourse of the faithful gathered together from all corners of the province. Your cremation would take place upon a particularly auspicious day, on the finest possible site, in the center of the Court of Honor of the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds!”

He added, the better to convince the worthy hermit:

“His Holiness the Grand Prior ‘Profundity and Meditation,’ piously exalted, would bless the sacred fire, and the worthy monks would join with him in prayer on your behalf! . . . Oh, my Reverend Father, what a touching and magnificent spectacle!”

At these words, Li Pi Tchou paused to allow the

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hermit in his turn to utter a cry of admiration; but the solitary maintained a gloomy silence which began to astonish Li Pi Tchou.

Possibly the holy Ancient's intelligence had suffered from his long seclusion? And Li Pi Tchou commenced a yet more moving description of the beautiful ceremony.

Pleasant memories recurred to his mind, and even as His Holiness the Grand Prior had reassured him, so he in turn informed the hermit:

"Your ashes will be piously collected; they will rest in a place of honor in the Temple of the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds among other remarkable relics exposed to the veneration of the faithful! . . ."

Li Pi Tchou, convinced of having developed his theme with logical eloquence, approached the hermit, and fearful of not being heard, bellowed in his ear:

"My Reverend Father, have you understood me?"

And the hermit, grimacing savagely, bleated:

"I have understood!"

Whereupon Li Pi Tchou exclaimed with enthusiastic conviction:

"What marvelous intelligence! . . ."

He resumed:

"And in any case, how could you hesitate? . . . Any morning your corpse might be lying alone, without a coffin, in his loathly hovel; it would be exposed to every profanation, even that of being devoured by a truant pig from my herd! . . . Whereas now, you are assured of . . ."

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But Li Pi Tchou was unable to finish his sentence.

Exasperated by his idiotic persistence, the hermit had at length decided to rise from his lair, and scattering his lice was snorting in an alarming fashion. Undoubtedly if he had understood something of Li Pi Tchou's oration, he had not received it with a glad heart; he was already extending a sinewy hand towards his staff, with the obvious intention of using it manfully.

Li Pi Tchou, between terror and despair, realized that his eloquence had been wasted!

Not even this hermit, for all his piety and indigence would cheerfully assent to being cooked as a means of becoming a lesser Buddha!

Li Pi Tchou, his heart torn with anguish, muttered confused apologies and hastened from the hut.

Happily for him, the hermit's mind was too torpid to dwell for long upon any one idea. Having watched the disappearance of his wretched visitor, he was content to wallow once more in his lair, giving vent to some parting snorts of fury.

If Li Pi Tchou was thus able to reach the borders of the forest without being pursued by the solitary whom he had so imprudently aroused. And that was always something for which he could be thankful!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HEARTBROKEN at his failure, poor Li Pi Tchou hurried towards the borders of the wood, and so great was his anxiety that he no longer took any care to avoid the thorns and brambles that tore at the tattered remnants of his breeches.

What mattered a few rags when his thoughts were elsewhere? He reflected that the morrow was a feast day which might well provide a lunar aspect favorable to his cremation, and already he felt the slow tortures of the sacred fire upon his shrinking skin.

Hardly had he reached the edge of the forest when his fears received a ghastly confirmation.

He perceived His Holiness the Grand Prior who, clad in full robes of state and surrounded by his principal bonzes, seemed to await his coming with ill-concealed impatience.

Behind this imposing assembly, and at a respectful distance, the young eunuch maintained a faithful guard over the two herds of swine; what explanation had he tendered to His Holiness the Grand Prior in excuse for his comrade's culpable negligence?

That, however, was a mere detail, since His Holiness the Grand Prior had most certainly not come with such an escort in order to ascertain whether his swine were well tended!

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Another motive had undoubtedly guided his steps, and Li Pi Tchou awaited the solemn announcement of his cremation, convinced that such a concourse of eminent religious would never have deranged themselves on his account had not his miserable person already begun to acquire an odor of sanctity!

Li Pi Tchou felt his legs giving way beneath him, a cold sweat beaded his forehead, a mist swam before his eyes and for one moment he thought that death was coming to deliver him from his cruel anguish.

From a distance, however, His Holiness the Grand Prior was motioning him graciously, and Li Pi Tchou, regaining partial consciousness, gazed in horror at the long sleeve that flapped like a bird of ill-omen!

Panic-stricken, he crawled towards the terrible Superior, and fell at his feet uttering heartrending moans.

His Holiness the Grand Prior addressed him courteously:

“My dear sir, I beg of you to compose yourself! . . . I have come, together with my holy monks, as the bearer of good tidings! . . .”

At these words Li Pi Tchou gave forth such a howl that His Holiness the Grand Prior paused in amazement.

“Oh, yes,” stammered poor Li Pi Tchou, “I know! . . . I know only too well! . . .”

His horror was so overwhelming that he was unable to finish his phrase.

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His Holiness the Grand Prior resumed with benevolence:

"Indeed, sir, you can know nothing, unless you are gifted with powers of divination; a talent of which your simple appearance is hardly suggestive! . . . Listen to me, therefore, attentively . . . I have this moment received from His Excellency the Grand Eunuch Li Pi Siao a reply to the missive concerning you which I had caused him to receive through the good offices of my estimable niece! . . ."

In no wise reassured by this exordium, Li Pi Tchou pointlessly stuttered:

"Yet another woman in my destiny! . . ."

His Holiness the Grand Prior permitted himself to smile.

"You have nothing to fear from my niece. . . . She is a well-educated and modest young person whose qualities have found favor with His Majesty the Holy Man! . . ."

And having thus done due honor to his family, he resumed:

"Making use in his turn of my niece as ambassadress, His Excellency the Grand Eunuch Li Pi Siao has graciously informed me that in order to add luster to the ceremony of your cremation he has decided to celebrate the occasion by a solemn burning of the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds!"

Whereupon His Holiness the Grand Prior ceased speaking and fell to frowning furiously.

The terrified Li Pi Tchou continued to moan:

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"But what has that to do with me, your Holiness?"

"It concerns you, on the contrary, very much indeed! . . . I have come to beg you, nay, more, to beseech you, to renounce the immense honor of being publicly incinerated to-morrow in the Court of Honor of my monastery! . . . Pray do not think that I minimize the greatness of the sacrifice to which I ask you to consent! . . . It must be bitter indeed to renounce, even in the cause of filial piety and of obedience to your venerable father, the glory of being sanctified in the presence of numberless believers! . . . But you will accept my sympathy as proportionately profound? . . ."

Bewildered, Li Pi Tchou gazed anxiously at the eloquent speaker; not knowing what to say, he thought it prudent to hold his peace.

His Holiness the Grand Prior therefore felt called upon to add a few details.

In measured and seemly accents, he informed Li Pi Tchou that his younger brother, who had so joyfully accepted the office disdained by himself, had unfortunately succumbed under the little operation necessitated by his new responsibilities.

At the announcement of this premature demise, Li Pi Tchou, as a dutiful brother, immediately began the lamentations prescribed by ritual.

His Holiness the Grand Prior waited patiently till he had finished, and he had to wait a considerable time, since Li Pi Tchou, despite his misfortunes, had remained faithful to the highest traditions.

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At length His Holiness the Grand Prior was able to resume his thesis: His Excellency Li Pi Siao, having thus lost in so distressing a fashion the good son on whom he had centered all his hopes, was yet unwilling to renounce completely his cherished intention of founding a species of family dynasty. The Grand Eunuch was therefore desirous of knowing what had befallen that elder son whom he had, in all wisdom and reason, been compelled to banish from his house. He was hopeful that this unworthy son might at length have repented, and he was generously willing to forgive him, on condition, however, that he recognized his error.

And His Holiness the Grand Prior added with sarcastic emphasis:

“You understand, of course, what that will entail? . . . Are you ready to make the small sacrifice required of you?”

“Oh, with all my heart!” cried poor Li Pi Tchou fervently.

“Your humility does you honor!” replied His Holiness the Grand Prior.

He resumed his narrative. Li Pi Siao, despite his active inquiries, had been unable to discover the whereabouts of his elder son; he was beginning to despair when His Holiness the Grand Prior’s niece, Miss Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring, had tactfully informed him of the immense honor for which that son had been selected by the good fathers of the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds.

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"If the truth must be told," concluded His Holiness the Grand Prior, confidentially addressing Li Pi Tchou, "I am afraid your venerable father may have misunderstood my excellent intentions towards you! I should be more than grateful, my dear sir, if you would go to him and set his mind at rest!"

The monks now crowded round Li Pi Tchou, showering compliments upon him, inquiring as to his state of health and his future projects. They overwhelmed him with protestations of friendship and respectful devotion.

The bewildered Li Pi Tchou was unable to believe his ears: idiotically he answered them all, bestowing foolish and indiscriminate thanks upon these excellent religious who had always shown such interest in his well-being.

His Holiness the Grand Prior had, however, summoned two litters, whose bearers had been waiting respectfully in the background, together with the young eunuch and his double herd of swine.

When the litters approached, His Holiness the Grand Prior invited Li Pi Tchou to take his place in the handsomest, and with his own hands courteously assisted him to do so.

But Li Pi Tchou, who had a generous soul, was incapable of thus forgetting his companion in misfortune. Beckoning the young eunuch, he informed him graciously:

"I feel certain that I could now arrange for His Holiness the Grand Prior to admit you to his monas-

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tery as a singer. . . . But in that case who would tend these poor swine whom I see over there, sadly deserted?"

His Holiness the Grand Prior, who was listening, hastened to reassure Li Pi Tchou.

"You need have no anxiety, dear sir, with regard to these interesting animals; more especially since one of the herds belongs to His Majesty the Holy Man. One of my good monks will remain with them until I find a person to take his place! . . ."

With a gesture towards the young eunuch, he added:

"Should you desire your comrade to enter my monastery as a singer, he can accompany us immediately."

But the castrate was suspicious, and intervened:

"I thank your Holiness for his kindly intentions towards me! . . . But for nothing on earth would I abandon the cherub of my herd, that suckling of which you can discern the quivering tail and which I have lovingly reared. Already he is fat and tender, and I count upon his assistance in the matter of my return to favor and the Violet Town!"

Addressing Li Pi Tchou, the faithful swineherd continued:

"Do not forget, dear sir, to inform His Excellency Li Pi Siao of my intentions. . . . I am in hopes that his heart may be touched!"

And the son of the Grand Eunuch replied warmly: "I shall not fail to do so! . . . And I am hopeful

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that we shall enjoy this succulent morsel together at the table of my venerable father."

Whereupon, bidding a most courteous farewell to his comrade of ill-fortune, he sank back in his chair with all his former dignity.

Then with mighty strides the bearers carried Li Pi Tchou towards the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds.

Amazed, the peasants in the rice-fields paused in their work in order to contemplate this tramp spreading his tatters in a superb litter; but observing the pious escort that accompanied him, they decided that he was doubtless the Saint who would be roasted on the morrow.

Moreover, invaded by that regrettable spirit of unbelief that was so sadly infesting the countryside, they had no envy for the lot of this privileged being, preferring to remain at their labors rather than to be exposed to such honor.

On the threshold of the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds, the lovely Chti smilingly awaited her fool of a husband, now about to return to greatness.

The instant he appeared, she hastened to bow before him, assuring him that she was his faithful wife and most willing servant. Humbly she prayed him to forgive her if sometimes, embittered by trouble, she had spoken incivilly.

Li Pi Tchou, who felt a return of self-confidence, replied only by a patronizing gesture, and despite the fact that he actually owed her his life, he turned away

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from her in disdain. In any case, a far more interesting spectacle was attracting his attention.

In the Court of Honor of the monastery a ravishing little pagoda had been constructed of light and rare woods. Its widely opened windows revealed a finely carved chair upon which the future Saint was destined to sit while awaiting pious cremation. This handsome architectural erection was liberally anointed with a scented resin wisely designed to delay the conflagration in order that the assembled faithful should have ample time in which to contemplate the ecstasies of the future Buddha! . . .

Meanwhile the monk "Radiance and Felicity" paced like a wild beast round and round his pagoda.

He was both infuriated and dismayed at the thought that the sacrificial chair might lack an occupant.

No sooner did he perceive Li Pi Tchou than he advanced upon him with a ferocious aspect; and drawing down his bushy brows over his flaming orbits he thundered in cavernous tones:

"Despise the goods of this world, sir, and permit yourself to be piously cremated."

And with an enticing gesture he indicated the pagoda.

Then, resuming his savage pacing, he repeated obstinately:

"Shame upon those beings of little faith who neglect their future salvation!"

The lovely Chti, humbly following the husband

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who seemed at length about to become an honorable official, was outraged by this display, and determined that the monk "Radiance and Felicity" should expiate his misplaced persistence.

His Holiness the Grand Prior having at that moment reappeared, his arms laden with the handsome garments destined to replace Li Pi Tchou's rags, Chti advanced to meet him, and having thanked him with effusion for all his kindness, she added thoughtfully:

"Your Holiness must be deeply grieved to see the success of your beautiful ceremony compromised by my husband's departure!"

The worthy superior assented with a sign of discouragement.

So Chti remarked pleasantly:

"I have but now heard the good monk 'Radiance and Felicity' raving with desire to be himself cremated!"

"Is that so?" cried His Holiness the Grand Prior. "Then indeed you have suggested a way out of my difficulties."

Immediately he sought the good monk, who was still engaged in preaching to Li Pi Tchou.

"All that you say is admirable," said the Grand Prior with unction, "and I perceive that I should be much to blame and at the same time doing you a grave injustice were I to fail in taking you at your word!"

The monk "Radiance and Felicity," a trifle anxious,

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began to speak of his unworthiness and impurity.

But His Holiness the Grand Prior interrupted him with an authoritative gesture:

"We will discuss your virtues later, my dear brother! Allow me meanwhile to attend to our guest, the most distinguished son of His Excellency the Grand Eunuch!"

And leaving the dear brother to his salutary meditations, His Holiness the Grand Prior rejoined Li Pi Tchou.

He graciously assisted him to clean himself, even going so far as to aid him in removing the lice from his pigtail. These he carefully cracked between his long nails, regardless of the fact that the suppression of their life was a sin against the Buddhist rule.

Finally, while humbly assisting him to don his breeches, he reiterated:

"I hope, dear sir, that you will always have a happy memory of our Sacred House!"

And he added:

"If it would please you to remain with us a few hours longer in order to witness our beautiful ceremony! . . ."

But Li Pi Tchou protested warmly:

"Your Holiness must excuse me, I should fear to seem a heretic in his eyes!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE spectacle was superb: Li Pi Tchou and the lovely Chti, comfortably installed in magnificent litters, quitted the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds, and preceded by heralds who cried their qualities and merits, passed through a double rank of bonzes assembled to wish them an auspicious voyage.

In order to do them honor, His Holiness the Grand Prior "Profundity and Meditation" had commanded that gongs should sound and that the bonzelings should sing in massed choir grouped upon the Temple steps, while the great Buddhist bell tolled majestically beneath the blows of the horizontal beam which was wielded by Li Pi Tchou's successor.

How different was this magnificent exit from the pitiable arrival of Li Pi Tchou prone in the donkey-cart of the begging bonze! . . .

It is indeed gratifying to resume officially the rank of son of the Grand Eunuch!

His Holiness the Grand Prior, profoundly moved, watched the departure of the guests upon whom he had showered such remarkable attentions.

He deeply regretted the lovely Chti who had been wont to awaken him so gracefully with her little bowl of warm and highly seasoned broth, and he

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wondered whether in future he would have courage to go forth and chant the Morning Prayer.

The departure of Li Pi Tchou also caused him some reflection since he was doubtful whether the simpleton had fully appreciated his kindness, and somewhat fearful of his future resentment.

He sought consolation in the fact that so lovely and distinguished a person as his niece would be at hand to intercede on his behalf, if necessary, with his Majesty the Holy Man.

Meanwhile, the heavy doors of the Monastery had slowly closed behind the departing travelers, and His Holiness the Grand Prior, in a most evil humor, paced the flags of the Court of Honor.

The crematory pagoda, in cruel irony, reared its sacred elegance before his disappointed gaze.

Around it, the brother "Radiance and Felicity" maintained his savage patrol, muttering continuously:

"Accursed be he who prefers the favors of this world to a pious sanctification!"

His Holiness the Grand Prior approached him gently:

"My dear brother, I am truly moved at your saintly lamentations! . . . I am incapable of resisting them and I am prepared to grant you full and entire satisfaction!"

The monk, slightly perturbed, paused in his complaining, and foreseeing at once whither matters were tending, he hastened to repeat, as upon the occasion

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of his earlier interview with His Holiness the Grand Prior:

"I am, alas, an unworthy creature! . . . My body is but a foul clout, and my spirit is polluted by the most guilty thoughts!"

His Holiness the Grand Prior smiled serenely:

"I know it, my dear brother, have you not already made humble confession in my presence; but such humility deserves to be rewarded and I fully absolve you here and now."

The monk grumbled:

"Heaven will scarcely endorse such gracious leniency!"

"Indeed it will," protested His Holiness the Grand Prior, "have no fear of that. I have known others guiltier than you absolved of all their sins! . . . Believe me, my dear brother, you are undeniably the best monk that I have ever known, and were I to reproach you for any excess, it would be for that of having exalted your piety with a zeal that borders on fanaticism! . . ."

Astounded, the monk "Radiance and Felicity" exclaimed:

"Fanatical! . . . I, the calmest, the most moderate of monks! . . . Fanatical! . . ."

"Indeed, my dear brother, you are more so than you are aware. Are you not even now possessed by a consuming desire to be piously sanctified?" inquired His Holiness the Grand Prior in mocking tones.

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But the good monk replied emphatically:

"I had better tell your Holiness the entire truth, and at once. With the deepest confusion I feel bound to admit that my spirit, haunted no doubt by some evil influence, is a prey to the most lamentable skepticism with regard to all that concerns my personal sanctification!"

"What!" cried His Holiness the Grand Prior, affecting profound affliction. "Have you then become a heretic that you should question the merit of our holy faith? Is she not as admirable and moving in her dogmas as in the least of her external manifestations?"

The monk "Radiance and Felicity" assumed a grave and thoughtful aspect:

"It is useless for your Holiness to fence any further. Let us state the case plainly and simply. . . . Your Holiness has the intention of roasting me, in the place of that imbecile Li Pi Tchou! . . . And you imagine that I shall amiably consent to enact the principal part in the drama which for me, and for me only, will be of tragic import! . . ."

And the monk "Radiance and Felicity," his arms akimbo, confronted his Superior with a savage glare.

His Holiness the Grand Prior stared back at him with scant benevolence, and observed without emotion:

"My dear brother, permit me to suggest that both your attitude and your statements seem to me out of place in our Sacred Abode! . . . My paternal heart

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grieves over this aberration, while I trust it is of a passing nature! . . .”

He added more gently:

“Will you not, my dear brother, pass the night in meditation before our Buddhas? . . . I am certain that to-morrow morning, moved by Celestial Grace, you will have returned to a holier frame of mind! . . .”

But the monk “Radiance and Felicity,” quite unmoved by this friendly suggestion, exclaimed:

“A truce to your scoffing! . . . We are here alone, face to face! . . . Why not be honest, since that pious herd of idiots is not here to listen! . . . Well, then, I declare to you once and for all; I will not be your dupe! . . . I am perfectly prepared to remain a fervent adept of a religion that I admire; but I refuse to be dictated to regarding the interpretation of the sacred scriptures! . . . In a word, if I still believe in Great Buddha the Creator, I reserve to myself the right to deny his representatives on earth when they distort, for pleasure or caprice, the true spirit of our Sacred Religion.”

At these words His Holiness the Grand Prior folded his arms in a gesture of indignation:

“All of which means, I suppose, that you adopt an attitude of rebellion towards your spiritual superior? . . .”

“Precisely,” replied the monk firmly, “and that I do not admit of a reasoning which, in a religion that makes a fetish of respecting life to the extent of for-

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bidding me to kill lice, arrives, via the false interpretation of its sacred doctrine, at the point of wishing to roast me like a duck!"

Before such blasphemy His Holiness the Grand Prior assumed an air of dismay:

"My poor brother, your spirit continues to wander from the true path. Try to remember that every religion has its Saints. . . . Now, I ask you, what constitutes a Saint? . . . Is he not one who, by an edifying and striking disappearance from this baser earth, attracts to himself the Blessing of Heaven and the Veneration of the Faithful? You cannot be unaware that in bygone times there have been eminent religious who attained such a state of perfection that suddenly, before the wondering gaze of beholders, they were consumed by the sacred fire of their own holiness. Do you deny these miracles?"

"I am quite willing to admit of them," said the monk, "but in so far as I am myself concerned, I am not inflammable to that degree."

"You will become so, my dear brother," affirmed His Holiness gently, "and if necessary I will assist the Heavens in the accomplishment of this new miracle! . . . In the false religion practiced by the pale-face Barbarians, they made use of fire in a detestable spirit of hatred, for the destruction of those whom they regarded as heretics or malefactors. But we, my dear brother, only employ the flames in a spirit of love, in order to secure an admirable beatification for those whom we venerate!"

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A prey to legitimate fury, the monk exclaimed violently:

"All religions are equal and are equally detestable when they are misapplied!"

And he repeated the celebrated maxim:

"Pou toun kiao, toun by." (Beliefs vary but reason endures!)

His Holiness the Grand Prior, accustomed to the greatest seemliness in his pious relations with his subordinates, was beginning to feel that the good monk "Radiance and Felicity" was permitting himself dangerous vagaries of speech and displaying a regrettable undiscipline.

He remarked sourly:

"All very fine indeed, my dear brother, but was it not you yourself, after all, who suggested this beautiful ceremony which while adding another Saint to our religion is to obtain substantial benefits for our congregation? . . . Not that I reproach you for the idea; far from it, I still consider it excellent. . . . But now that we have gone to the expense of constructing so elegant a crematory chapel, now that we have invited the entire province to our monastery, now that from every side the faithful are thronging to this pious ceremony, you would actually, in your deplorable obstinacy, suggest that I should voluntarily renounce so many precious advantages, and you would allow me to appear a fool before the entire concourse of our guests! . . . Well, then, my dear brother, you may take it as said: we may yet see in

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this world many extraordinary happenings: the whole of China overwhelmed by an earthquake: the Chinese devoured by plague, famine or cholera: or even His Majesty the Holy Man deposed from his throne by an impious revolution; but one thing there is that you will never see, and that is that a Grand Prior should consent to the bankruptcy of his monastery!"

And as the brother "Radiance and Felicity" continued to mutter and to display evidences of the most culpable insubordination, His Holiness the Grand Prior beckoned discreetly to a trusty porter who from a distance had watched the scandalous scene with growing stupefaction.

Of mighty stature, well adapted to a devoted servant whose duty it is to preserve discipline and to protect the entrance to a Sacred House, the porter threw himself unexpectedly upon the brother "Radiance and Felicity" and in a hand's turn trussed him up securely with a hempen cord. After which, having skilfully gagged him, he bore him like a large parcel to his cell.

His Holiness the Grand Prior, satisfied that his authority was now established, turned the key in the lock and went back to supervise the details of the ceremonial cremation.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE following day, at dawn, His Holiness the Grand Prior "Profundity and Meditation," accompanied by his faithful and gigantic porter, paid a visit to the monk "Radiance and Felicity" in his cell.

That unfortunate religious, still bound and gagged, lay upon the floor in pitiable plight.

His Holiness the Grand Prior had grounds for believing that his subordinate had had ample time for salutary meditation upon his mortal end.

He therefore commanded that the gag be removed, leaving the victim securely bound but able to express satisfaction in the event of having experienced a change of heart during the night.

The good monk was at first unable to proffer a sound, his lips being completely numbed by the gag which had been forced between them.

His Holiness the Grand Prior charitably came to his assistance:

"You are doubtless eager, my dear brother, to express your regret regarding your conduct towards me last evening. . . . Be comforted, I forgive you with all my heart, provided, of course, that you are resolved to maintain a decent, even an edifying, behavior during to-day's beautiful ceremony! . . . Bear in mind, my dear brother, the splendid literary

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name which you have hitherto graced with so much dignity! . . . ‘Radiance and Felicity’ . . . Is that not a name predestined to achieve beatification by a pious cremation? . . .”

A savage growl, ejected in a most unprecedented manner from a contracted throat, interrupted His Holiness the Grand Prior in the midst of his wise exhortations.

The brother “Radiance and Felicity” managed to articulate:

“I shall give the utmost possible scandal! . . .”

“You actually desire to scandalize the assembled faithful, my dear brother!” cried His Holiness the Grand Prior, seized with legitimate indignation; and addressing the porter he exclaimed:

“Can you not make this sturdy rebel see reason?”

Hardly had His Holiness the Grand Prior finished speaking, when the porter, always eager to show his zeal, aimed a terrific and doubtless convincing blow with his staff at the shaven crown of the monk “Radiance and Felicity.”

“Have you not struck rather hard?” inquired His Holiness the Grand Prior on seeing the monk’s head sink heavily on to his breast.

The porter was examining with some confusion the skull which he had so promptly fractured, and he was already proffering humble apologies.

Fortunately for him His Holiness the Grand Prior took the matter lightly:

“We will crown this dear brother with a handsome

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mitre which will serve to conceal his trifling injury! . . . In any case I can now be certain that this man of little faith will retain an edifying calm throughout the ceremony! . . .”

Whereupon he ordered the porter to remove the bonds from the corpse, and proceeded to dress it in its handsomest vestments and to adorn it with its richest sacerdotal ornaments.

Finally he had the brother “Radiance and Felicity” placed in the elegantly carved chair which was installed in the center of the crematory pagoda.

They propped the dead man in his seat, arranging him in an attitude of reflection.

His head was bowed in a most natural manner and he appeared to contemplate his navel as beseemed one about to become a lesser Buddha! Moreover, the position caused his mitre to throw over his face a shadow which opportunely concealed its waxen hue.

One of his hands was extended, palm outwards, as though blessing the multitude, and in the other they placed a carven lotus flower of gilded wood.

His Holiness the Grand Prior, drawing back a few steps in order to gauge the full effect produced, pronounced himself fully satisfied.

Hunched in his pagoda with the widely opened windows, the good monk “Radiance and Felicity” resembled an idol whose sacerdotal gestures maintained an impressive permanence.

His Holiness the Grand Prior announced the beginning of the ceremony.

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All the bonzes and bonzelings moved gravely to their preëstablished places.

The arches of the temple rang with liturgical chanting, the bonzelings hammered on the sacred gongs and the huge Buddhist bell filled the air with its majestic voice.

Then, at a sign from His Holiness the Grand Prior, the porter slowly opened the great doors of the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds to the concourse of the faithful who impatiently awaited admittance to the Sacred House.

A veritable human ocean surged into the precincts of the monastery. The din was deafening and the tumult indescribable.

From more than a hundred lis around the farmers and the peasants had harnessed their mules to their blue-hooded, yellow-wheeled wagons and accompanied by their aged parents, whom they brought with them out of filial duty, they flocked to witness the marvelous spectacle.

On all sides of the monastery the uplifted shafts of the unharnessed wagons formed a veritable forest, while their mules wandered grazing at will across the fields.

Bestowing sundry thumps upon the populace as a reminder of their master's importance, the heralds at arms, halberdiers and bodyguards of the various local Excellencies opened a passage through the crowd for the state litters wherein lounged mandarins of every degree.

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His Holiness the Grand Prior "Profundity and Meditation," who possessed a true appreciation of social degrees, measured the depth of his obeisance and the quality of his welcome according to the color of the button that lurked among the peacock feathers of the headdresses.

Preceded by a red parasol, solemnly borne amid lacquer placards proclaiming in golden letters his merits and virtues, His Excellency the Tao Tai * of the neighboring town had come in state to emphasize by his official presence the respect in which he held those who maintained the ancient traditions.

His entry to the Monastery was the signal for a general rush of idlers who crowded around his litter notwithstanding a generous allowance of blows distributed by his armed guard.

But the bonzelings, hammering their gongs with redoubled zeal, preserved the full majesty of the official entry:

At the exact moment when the Tao Tai alighted from his chair, His Holiness the Grand Prior gave the signal for the letting off of all the rockets of welcome; then amid the ensuing smoke, he paid his respects to the civil authority.

Meanwhile, around the crematory pagoda the crowd was dense to stifling.

Each peasant in turn, assailed by a vague ancestral superstition, desired to approach the future Saint

* Tao Tai—species of subprefect.

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with a humble prayer that he would remember the harvest when he should have attained almighty power among the assembly of the good Buddhas!

The more fanatical, desirous of securing his protection against the evil spirits of winds and waters, were eager to invade the pagoda in order to kiss his saintly slippers.

His Holiness the Grand Prior, deeply moved, nevertheless opposed these excessive demonstrations, and extending his great sleeves in a majestic gesture he protected the entrance to the pagoda and rebuked the would-be intruders, saying:

“Do not disturb our good Saint in his supreme meditations!”

Then, with the assistance of soldiers graciously lent him by the Tao Tai, he banished to a suitable distance those of the vulgar herd who were unable, by generous donations, to prove their right to rank as minor mandarins.

Among the numerous assembly there was an interchange of pious confidences.

His Holiness the Grand Prior had wisely preserved until the last moment the anonymity of the future Saint, and certain of the truly faithful who frequented the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds had recognized the good monk “Radiance and Felicity” and were murmuring his name.

Glad to arouse the interest of their neighbors they added further information:

“The choice is a happy one, for that monk has

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always impressed us by the gloomy mysticism of his aspect!"

And they added:

"Ah! If the venerable religious would only bestow upon us his parting commands, you could admire for yourselves his impressive and cavernous voice!"

But the good monk "Radiance and Felicity" remained silent, and for an excellent reason. A fact which much distressed the pious assembly.

However, they were able to admire his imperturbable calm, the majesty graven upon his features and the untiring resolution with which he kept his hand outstretched in benediction.

On all sides ran the whispers:

"What admirable serenity! . . . What an edifying spectacle! . . ."

And His Excellency the Tao Tai, befittingly installed in the foremost rank of the audience, praised the selection made by His Holiness the Grand Prior, who bowed modestly in acknowledgment of his well-deserved compliments regarding the organization of the ceremony.

By now, all visitors had somehow contrived to enter the sacred precincts.

The Grand Tartar, the same, by the way, who had so pleasantly violated the lovely Chti, had come, together with his warriors, to beseech Heaven's forgiveness for that peccadillo, and at the same time to preserve order. He therefore occupied a fairly good position immediately behind the lesser mandarins.

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As he had latterly been admitted to His Holiness the Grand Prior's confidence in the matter of preventing the escape of Li Pi Tchou, he was somewhat surprised to see a bonze roasted in his stead, but he did not display his astonishment. In any case, the matter was of small importance since he would receive exactly the same share of the proceeds! . . .

With less assurance, the Khonghouses, headed by their chief, had climbed the outer walls of the monastery and had remained astride of them, ready to decamp in the event of His Excellency the Tao Tai pointing them out to his police. But the Tao Tai was too well brought up to disturb a holy ceremony by mundane arrests.

In point of fact, all classes of the province were worthily represented. Even the beggars, as they had promised Li Pi Tchou, had come to thread their way among the crowd in the hopes of reaping alms from the general emotion.

His Holiness the Grand Prior regarded these wretched competitors with distaste, but he, like the Tao Tai, was too well educated to risk the smallest commotion.

The young eunuch himself, drawn by curiosity, had for the moment deserted the Holy Man's swine, in order to get a look at Li Pi Tchou's substitute so worthily seated in his handsome carved chair.

The hermit alone, who, had he wished it, might himself have profitably occupied that place of honor, had not succeeded in dragging himself from his lousy

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retreat. But while his presence would doubtless have added luster to the ceremony, his absence fortunately passed unobserved.

The solemn moment had arrived:

With great pomp, His Holiness the Grand Prior, clad in robes of state, advanced with slow and majestic steps towards the pagoda of cremation. And while the gongs and the rockets mingled their clang-ing and their crackling and the bonzes intoned the liturgical chants to which the bonzelings in treble accents invited Heaven's attention, His Holiness the Grand Prior, bowing deeply to the Tao Tai, applied the ceremonial torch to the perfumed resin which coated the crematory pagoda.

A religious silence hovered over the pious assembly; all hearts beat with the same holy emotion and all gazes were fixed in admiration upon the future lesser Buddha!

Brilliant flames now surrounded the good monk "Radiance and Felicity," who maintained an astonishing impassiveness.

His features remained unmoved in their severe majesty, and his hand, of which the skin was already singed, continued untiringly to bless the multitude.

Before such an amazing proof of serenity, every one of those present felt his heart stirred by divine grace.

Even the Tao Tai, who sometimes affected a certain skepticism, was impressed by a manifestation of ardent faith which bordered upon the miraculous.

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The good monk "Radiance and Felicity" was grilling cheerfully and piously, without a movement, without a cry of pain! Truly it was a spectacle calculated to confound the most unbelieving!

Deeply touched, the beholders were beginning to exchange their impressions and many admitted that they had been wrong to doubt.

The bonzes moved among them graciously receiving conversions and repents. They made it abundantly clear that Heaven would not remain insensible to appeal, provided always that the appellants' sincerity was guaranteed by holy alms. And they bestowed unctuous blessings and absolution upon the generous givers.

In the meantime the flaming pagoda had finally collapsed upon the charred remains of Heaven's Elect.

In order to hasten the final combustion, His Holiness the Grand Prior commanded that buckets of perfumed resin should be thrown upon the incandescent brazier. . . .

At length there remained of so much splendor and elegance nothing but a heap of smoking ashes.

With great ceremony His Holiness the Grand Prior sought therein for the calcined bones of the brother "Radiance and Felicity."

These were laid comfortably upon a bed of the ashes provided by his flesh and by the burned pagoda, and were enclosed in a beautiful coffer of gilded lacquer. Then amid songs of triumph that shook the vaulting of the Temple, a solemn procession deposited

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these venerable relics at the feet of the Great Buddhas who, squatting impassive upon their lotus blooms, remained rapt in contemplation of the umbilicus.

When all was accomplished His Holiness the Grand Prior was unable to restrain a deep sigh which might well have expressed relief. Then, having duly thanked the authorities for their valuable support, and having respectfully accompanied His Excellency the Tao Tai to the threshold of the Monastery, he returned to attend to the lesser people who still thronged the Court of Honor, suggesting pleasantly that they should visit the Gallery of Torments, and the Menagerie of Monsters as a fitting end to a day of edification and repentance.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WHILE the good monk “Radiance and Felicity” was quietly roasting in due place and time, for the greater edification of the faithful, Li Pi Tchou, without the smallest repining, proceeded peacefully upon his way back to the family domicile, and lounging in his litter he fanned himself as of yore.

The bearers were young and vigorous and advanced rapidly without fatigue.

And Li Pi Tchou, moved to a happy comparison, reflected upon all the annoyances he had suffered from the mule of which the Khonghouses had so fortunately robbed him.

As for the lovely Chti, swinging gently in her litter, she entirely failed to regret the heavy wagon in which she had so painfully jolted upon her little stool between two piles of baggage.

Her thoughts dwelt quite simply upon the outrages to which her virtue had been subjected in the course of her wanderings. She recalled without undue rancor the tender effusions of His Holiness the Grand Prior and the military ardors of the Grand Tartar, not forgetting the passionate violence of the Khonghouse Chief and of all his bandits.

These were adventures indeed for a respectable lady who hitherto secluded in her own apartments

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had known only the licit caresses of a worthy spouse!

And the lovely Chti sighed very deeply, but none could have told the reason of her regret.

Perhaps His Holiness the Grand Prior in his ecclesiastical vanity might have imagined himself its cause? But was there any ground for assuming that the Grand Tartar or even the Chief of the Khong-houses had not left a more durable impression upon that enigmatical heart?

In any case it was certainly not the impending castration of her worthy husband that saddened this amiable person. She had remained sufficiently devoted to him to experience real joy at seeing him about to embrace an honorable career.

She had indeed retained the most laudable sentiments despite the fact that an ironical fate had in a few weeks endowed her with as many lovers as the most popular courtesan.

But the lovely Chti had had no hand therein, except perhaps in so much as concerned His Holiness the Grand Prior.

Under various and painful circumstances, she had retained enough presence of mind to enable her to save her husband's life; and in so doing had undoubtedly acquired merit!

She therefore suffered neither remorse nor false shame; and she would have felt no awkwardness in retaining the Grand Tartar's ring, the Khonghouse Chief's bracelet or the pearl necklace given her by His Holiness the Grand Prior; it was, in fact, only

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the thought that they would probably be taken from her that caused her some dismay.

However, the journey was accomplished without incident and in the most auspicious manner.

The bearers made short work of crossing the great forest in which Li Pi Tchou and the lovely Chti would have died of hunger had they not been collected by the donkey-cart of the charitable monk, and soon they were proceeding cheerily along the dusty highroad that led to Peking.

Perfect peace reigned everywhere, since the Grand Tartar and the Khonghouses were piously engaged in witnessing the cremation of the good monk "Radiance and Felicity"; the fields, bereft of their laborers who had also hastened to attend the ceremony at the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds, were deserted as on a Feast Day.

Only the buffaloes, submerged to their necks in the stinking water of the bogs, inhaled, in their usual way, their pestilent vapors through wide and mighty nostrils.

And Li Pi Tchou, bestowing a melancholy glance upon the poisonous marshes, reflected that he had been reduced to quenching his thirst from them in the company of his swine.

Happily all that was already behind him and he was hastening to a brilliant destiny that would console him for all past misfortunes.

He thought with emotion of the reception which he would receive from his venerable father, and

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started preparing those elegant literary phrases which would serve to convey his humble apologies.

So much engrossed was he in this praiseworthy occupation that he lost all sense of the duration of the journey and was much astonished on the afternoon of the second day to perceive on the horizon the mighty walls of Peking.

He had imagined that his mule had drawn him to a much greater distance. Had she not galloped furiously at times? But he was forgetting the stationary intervals of kicking and bucking.

At any rate Li Pi Tchou was compelled to hasten the composition of his literary phrases, and he had barely completed the final sentence when the bearers, having turned into a familiar lane, deposited him at the threshold of his home.

Almost at the same moment, the lovely Chti also descended from her chair, and together, with beating hearts, they entered the great courtyard.

Opposite them upon the steps of the central pavilion, a group of the Palace doctors, clad in long yellow robes and pointed caps, gravely awaited Li Pi Tchou . . . behind them, modestly withdrawn but also wearing a pointed cap, appeared the Grand Executioner of the Violet Town.

At the top of the steps, towering over them all, His Excellency Li Pi Siao maintained an attitude of majestic severity.

Contrary to his usual habit when absent from the

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Violet Town, the Grand Eunuch was neither travestied nor disguised.

He had contented himself, as had the doctors who attended him, with traveling in a litter so enclosed as to exclude any indiscreet glances.

He therefore now displayed all the magnificence of his ceremonial robes, and moreover he brandished majestically his official fly-whisk, symbol of his high authority.

The lovely Chti who had never seen her father-in-law in his robes of office was profoundly impressed at what she considered his truly magnificent air. She deeply admired the green dragons with scarlet maws that grimaced at her from his yellow robe, and likewise the large scarlet pompoms that swung at the ends of the wide ribbons that fell from either side of his square headdress.

At the thought that her husband would shortly be entitled to wear equally handsome garments, she felt her heart swell with lawful pride and tenderness; for should it not be the dearest wish of every respectable woman to see him whose name she bears attain a situation that does honor to them both: are not all other sentiments futility?

Meanwhile, Li Pi Tchou had prostrated himself at the feet of his venerable father, and having repeatedly knocked his forehead on the ground he began to recite the lengthy speech which he had so carefully prepared.

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In a tone of irritation the Grand Eunuch interrupted this despicable son:

"For pity's sake spare me the boredom of your literary excuses. No one knows better than I do that you have received a good education and that you have a knowledge of the classics; at any rate I should hope so! . . . But it matters little, for the elegant form in which you attempt to enfold your thoughts will not serve to conceal their nature. Once and for all, have you now decided to follow my advice, or do you still wish to make game of me? . . . Answer me simply, Yes or No!"

With a wide gesture he indicated the group of doctors:

"These gentlemen await your decision! . . ."

And then, pointing solemnly to the Grand Executioner of the Violet Town, he added:

"And this worthy fellow awaits mine!"

Li Pi Tchou, appalled, and vaguely hoping for paternal pity, continued to knock his forehead on the ground.

But the Grand Eunuch remained unmoved and merely repeated in the shrillest accents of his treble voice:

"Choose, my son, be good enough to choose!"

Then Li Pi Tchou stammered in trembling tones:

"Oh venerable father, I joyfully place my destiny in your honored hands!"

The Grand Eunuch frowned and replied:

"For your stupid hesitation you deserve that I

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should order your head to be severed from your body! . . . But my paternal heart is not unmoved by pity, and these gentlemen will merely assist you in advancing to a position more in keeping with the dignity of my own!"

And he promptly invited the doctors to approach and minister to his illustrious offspring.

These gentlemen surrounded Li Pi Tchou and begged him most politely to rise and accompany them into the pavilion where the great reception hall had been prepared for them.

Li Pi Tchou, resigned, followed the doctors, while the lovely Chti, wisely feeling that her presence could only be superfluous on so auspicious an occasion, withdrew in haste to the women's apartments.

In the meantime the Grand Eunuch, mollified by his son's submission, had rejoined the doctors inside the pavilion.

He was now anxious that all should be accomplished in good order and according to ritual.

Observing his son's emotion, he began to reassure him:

"These gentlemen are as we are! . . . It is they who have the immense honor of attending the sacred person of His Majesty the Holy Man, Son of Heaven; they also guard the health of his venerable spouse and of his eighty and one delectable concubines! . . . I therefore entrust you, my son, to the honorable hands of the most celebrated doctors of the entire middle Empire . . . and moreover, I must

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again remind you that in all that concerns your case, they are the more solicitous for having themselves, in the past, joyfully undergone the same ritual with a view to shedding the radiant light of their learning among the shadows of the Violet Town!"

Having thus generously encouraged his son, His Excellency the Grand Eunuch addressed the group of doctors:

"You are fully aware, gentlemen, of the high esteem in which I hold your admirable science! . . . It is for that reason that I hasten to remind you that I shall not tolerate the smallest mischance! Should any such occur, I shall unhesitatingly ascribe it to negligence . . . Your predecessors have been hung high and dry for having caused the death of my estimable younger son, who had with so much filial piety joyfully agreed to accompany me into the Violet Town! . . . Your fate, gentlemen, would be identical, were you to repeat their error on the person of my elder son! . . . Undeniably he has not the moral value of his brother, but I have no longer any choice! . . . I am resolved that he shall in due course succeed me, if he can acquire some intelligence, which he may easily do after the ceremony which he so urgently requires! . . . I think you have understood me, Gentlemen and Doctors of the Violet Town!"

And the Grand Eunuch froze them with a terrible glance.

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Trembling, the doctors bleated together in touching chorus:

"Our humble opinion is that your honored son appears to us to be very thin at present, and somewhat ailing! . . ."

"By Buddha!" swore the Grand Eunuch indignantly: "Are you trying to evade your responsibilities? . . . Are you or are you not princes of the medical science? . . . As for my son, it is true that he is rather thin; but he has inherited from his father a magnificent constitution! . . ."

And seeing that the doctors still hesitated, the Grand Eunuch added:

"The Grand Executioner is at your disposal if you are not at mine! . . ."

However, Li Pi Tchou, according to ritual, had commenced the correct funeral oration for the brother of whose premature death he had only now received official information, but the Grand Eunuch cut short his eloquence:

"I have already told you that I am in no doubt of your literary capacities! . . . But I will hear your funeral oration at some other time! . . . You may rest assured in any case that your brother reposes worthily in a magnificent coffin in a place of honor among those of our ancestors! . . . And moreover, in order that he may appear before them in seemly guise, I have piously placed in his coffin beneath his hand the admirable little vessel, the vessel bestowed upon me, as you will remember,

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by the generosity of his Majesty the Holy Man!"

Despite this reassuring address, Li Pi Tchou preserved a pitiable air, and he contemplated without enthusiasm the doctors' preparations.

"My son," declared the Grand Eunuch, "I wish to relieve you of one great anxiety. I give you my word that in the event of disaster overtaking you, my generosity will bestow upon you obsequies equal to those of your brother!"

And drawing from his long sleeve an exquisite little vessel of the finest porcelain:

"Behold! . . . I have prepared for you a joyful surprise: His Majesty the Holy Man, moved by my misfortune, has been graciously pleased to renew his precious gift in favor of the second son whom I dedicate to his honorable service!"

Then, thrusting the handsome vessel under the nose of the shrinking Li Pi Tchou, he declaimed:

"Observe, my son, the delicious perfume! . . . The ancient roseate liquor of the Academicians! I have on your behalf filled this delicate bibelot from the contents of an ancient vessel . . . For you I have made this important sacrifice! . . ."

Touched by this final proof of paternal devotion, Li Pi Tchou could only bow and murmur his most humble acknowledgments.

CHAPTER TWENTY

NEARLY three moons had elapsed since the little episode which had occurred so advantageously to Li Pi Tchou.

Thanks to his excellent constitution he had survived all the attentions of the Princes of Medicine; a result which is surprising in almost any country!

His strength had gradually returned to him, and with it his good humor. It is true that he was heartened by the fact that upon his bedside table, between a cup of broth and a pot of ointment, victoriously reposed the elegant little Imperial vessel!

At this agreeable sight the invalid's thoughts dwelt upon the magnificent future that awaited him, a future brilliant enough indeed to banish any depression.

The lovely Chti, with untiring devotion had remained night and day at her husband's bedside, loading him with eager attentions.

As soon as he was able to take a little nourishment, she prepared for him some nicely heated broth, which she offered him smiling, exactly as she had been wont to do for His Holiness the Grand Prior "Profundity and Meditation"; but in the present case she omitted to add any useless seasoning.

And tenderly she made constant inquiries regarding

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the health of that husband for whom her esteem was daily increasing.

As soon as he felt well enough to sustain a conversation, Li Pi Tchou one morning addressed this devoted spouse:

"Madam," he began in a feeble voice, "I am very grateful to you for the attentions with which you surround me. But do you feel no regret at the sacrifice that you have been compelled to make?"

Thinking that her convalescent husband's mind was wandering, Chti controlled her desire to laugh and exclaimed:

"Are you not confusing the rôles, my dear Lord and Master?"

But Li Pi Tchou was quite unable to appreciate this courteous rejoinder.

In melancholy accents, he murmured:

"Am I to understand, then, that you have no regrets at all?"

Thoughtlessly the lovely Chti confessed:

"My heart, on the contrary, is overflowing with joy . . . I behold your future assured. You are about to become an honorable official of whom I shall be extremely proud . . . Honors and fortune await you and you will enjoy the glory of admission to the presence of His Majesty the Holy Man, Son of Heaven."

Li Pi Tchou interrupted her:

"Do not let us speak of my future, madam! What

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I desire to know is whether you have no regrets regarding that which concerns you personally?"

Chti surveyed him with innocent eyes:

"What regrets could I possibly entertain when I see you elevated to a brilliant and lucrative situation? A little of all your radiance will doubtless illuminate your humble servant, who, comfortably installed in a luxurious home, will listen proudly to the praises showered upon the merits and virtues of her honorable husband."

Then, with an engaging smile, she added:

"I shall moreover know how to receive your kindness with the deepest gratitude and to bring up my son in the veneration of his father. For myself, henceforward, I am extremely happy to be assured of ageing decorously amid general esteem and of finally reposing gloriously in a magnificent coffin beside that of a celebrated husband . . . What more, indeed, can a respectable woman desire?"

And she naïvely contemplated Li Pi Tchou as though unable to fathom the cause of his profound vexation.

At length he enunciated painfully:

"And our love, madam?"

For a moment she appeared to reflect, then she gravely replied:

"I pray you to excuse me if I have ever failed in the fulfilment of my conjugal duties!"

In spite of his weakness, Li Pi Tchou was shaken by a righteous fury:

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"Your duties," cried he in strident tones. "Do you dare to make use of such a word?"

And threatening the lovely Chti with a feeble fist he exclaimed:

"Truly I was an unmitigated idiot to risk so many dangerous adventures for the sake of such a silly sheep as you are! . . . The plague take all women! . . . My venerable father was indeed wise! . . ."

At that very moment who should arrive on tiptoe but His Excellency Li Pi Siao come to pay his daily visit to his son.

The Grand Eunuch overheard Li Pi Tchou's closing words and his paternal heart was melted with tenderness. Deeply moved he advanced towards his son with open arms:

"I bless Heaven that has at last restored to me such a son as I desired . . . I have but now overheard you, my son, dutifully honoring your father and recognizing his wisdom. My spirit soars on wings of happiness and you may rest assured that your future will be safe in my hands!"

Then, savagely addressing the now speechless Chti: "Madam, I think your baleful influence is ended."

At that moment his eye fell upon the handsome love-gifts with which Chti had most imprudently adorned her person.

Frowning terribly he cried:

"What are these new ornaments that you wear with such ostentation?" And then and there he demanded the most complete explanations.

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Chti, in great confusion, humbly lowered her head and dared not utter a word.

The Grand Eunuch resumed:

"You would indeed be at some loss to reply! . . . Kindly retire to your apartments and await my orders!"

With a haughty gesture he motioned her to the door, and, trembling, the lovely Chti crept away on her little broken feet.

As soon as she had disappeared the Grand Eunuch gravely addressed his son:

"I desire that you will inform me of the exact truth! . . . I am confident that you will not again offend against filial piety by the smallest prevarication!"

Much troubled, but not daring to disobey the mandates of his terrible father, poor Li Pi Tchou began in a trembling voice the narrative of all his misfortunes. With praiseworthy humility he omitted no detail, neither his quarrels with the recalcitrant mule, the fleas by which he had been devoured during his first night in the best hotel in an important village, nor his luncheon at the wayside inn among the staring and mocking coolies.

Then he described the arrival at that inn of the Grand Tartar and of his soldiers; also that which had come of it.

"It was there," he explained, "that Chti received the ring."

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"By Buddha!" muttered the Grand Eunuch. "And what about the bracelet, if you please?"

Li Pi Tchou, more and more perturbed, went on to describe in a pathetic manner the vicissitudes of his horrible adventure with the Khonghouses in the gloomy forest.

"And that explains the bracelet! . . ." he added piteously.

"I have understood only too well," scolded the Grand Eunuch. . . . "Remains the pearl necklace!"

Li Pi Tchou sighed:

"In what concerns the pearl necklace, I am unable to furnish you with exact details, for the reason that I was too busily engaged washing dishes in the kitchens of the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds, while Chti was employed each morning in bearing a little hot, well-seasoned broth to the bedside of His Holiness the Grand Prior 'Profundity and Meditation.' "

"Quite so," observed the Grand Eunuch bitterly, "the uncle of my number 19, Miss Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring! . . . The scoundrel!"

Glaring angrily at his foolish son he inquired:

"And since you have been incapable of guarding your own and only wife, how will you contrive to guard an Empress and eighty and one concubines?"

Li Pi Tchou bowed his head in confusion. He felt the justice of his father's reproaches and could only murmur:

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"I shall learn by your example, oh my venerable father!"

"And you will be well advised!" answered the Grand Eunuch sourly, and then broke forth into a fresh access of fury. "And this perfidious wench who has so abominably outraged the honor of the Lis is still alive! . . . Nay more, she was here even now, still flaunting her shameful tokens! . . . Have you then lost your senses, my son, that you tolerate the presence of so unworthy a creature?"

Li Pi Tchou ventured to observe:

"She has tended me with the greatest devotion!"

"Indeed?" replied the Grand Eunuch ironically, "and such small services, questionably disinterested in any case, suffice to absolve her in your eyes?"

Seeing that his father's indignation was waxing, Li Pi Tchou insisted:

"But remember, my father, that but for her I should have been decapitated by the Grand Tartar, impaled by the Khonghouses or roasted at a slow fire by His Holiness the Grand Prior! But for her, I should . . ."

"But for her," bellowed the Grand Eunuch, "you would from the outset have followed my wise counsels, and you would have been spared much anguish and cruel sufferings. . . . But for her you would never have been flogged either by the Grand Tartar or by the Khonghouses! . . . But for her you would not have endured the humiliation of washing the dishes or herding the swine of any monastery . . .

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But for her, finally, I should still possess a wagon harnessed to a handsome mule to say nothing of the ingot of gold given me by His Majesty the Holy Man for the purpose of buying him a musical alarm-clock and which I had the weakness to bestow on you! . . . I will not even mention your luggage and your belongings! . . . Why, it is a positive disaster to possess such a wife!"

Having reflected for some moments amid somber mutterings, the Grand Eunuch concluded:

"The honor of the Lis demands that such a miserable creature should be cut while still living into as many pieces as there are stars in heaven or pigs on earth! . . . The pigs indeed might fitly feed upon her remains! . . ."

Li Pi Tchou, appalled, nevertheless made some efforts to defend the unfortunate Chti. His recent conversation with her had undeniably disillusioned him on her account, but in spite of his mortification he felt a certain pity for the woman who, whatever the Grand Eunuch might say, had been instrumental in saving his life.

Vainly he sought for an argument capable of tempering his venerable father's fury.

Li Pi Siao rallied him bitterly:

"You actually appear to feel regret at the imminent disappearance of so amiable a spouse!"

And he added yet more satirically:

"Of what use can she now be to you? . . . She can only recall to your mind most painful memories! . . .

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Has she not long since fulfilled her only conceivable purpose in giving you a son who will pay you Ancestral honors?"

At these words Li Pi Tchou wailed:

"It is precisely and only on account of that son, who will presently render to your spirit the ritual duties that I implore your clemency in favor of Chti!"

He skilfully elaborated:

"The old scriptures are unequivocal: 'The son of a woman who has deserved to be cut into pieces, shall at the very least, be shamefully decapitated so that the earth may not be cumbered by the impure fruit of a detestable tree.'"

And he added:

"Your high position forbids your disdaining the ancient scriptures. You will therefore be compelled to sacrifice your grandson, and we shall both equally be deprived of Ancestral worship!"

The Grand Eunuch listened gravely to his son's definition of an undeniable fact, and he reflected long and sadly.

"I am compelled to admit that you are right, and that Chti, did she deserve it a thousand times, cannot be ignominiously cut in pieces. Her son saves her from such well-merited chastisement."

Encouraged, Li Pi Tchou continued:

"In any case, as I said before, it was against her will, and entirely with a view to saving my life, that Chti was forced to undergo the extremity of outrage."

The Grand Eunuch started:

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"I beg of you, do not seek to exonerate her; especially as regards her relations with His Holiness the Grand Prior!"

And regaining his composure, he added:

"Moreover, even were you able, by force of eloquence, to bamboozle me into admitting that Chti has offended us unwillingly, we should still be faced by the learned maxim of which I would remind you: 'If a man of good upbringing has the misfortune while eating his rice to let his chopsticks fall upon unclean ground, he must not recover them or replace them on the table in the presence of other guests . . .' Now Chti, whatever may be the cause, has been soiled; we cannot therefore reinstate her!"

He paused; then having once more reflected deeply, he concluded:

"I behold myself, however, reduced to exercising the most incredible leniency . . . I shall simply return your unworthy wife to her honorable parents!"

"And in what manner?" inquired the astonished Li Pi Tchou.

"Yes, indeed," murmured the Grand Eunuch, pursuing his own train of thought, "it will be wiser not to publish our misfortune, and wisdom as well as justice decrees that we should restore to these parents a properly silent daughter. Chti will therefore be beheaded by the Grand Executioner; but I shall see to it that her head is afterwards sewn to her body, for the ancient scriptures that you quoted also decree: 'A son whose mother is incomplete after death

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is no longer entitled to address prayers to Heaven! . . . Therefore, since my grandson will eventually pray solemnly before our coffins! . . . You perceive that I provide for everything!"

Without awaiting a reply from Li Pi Tchou, who was dumbfounded, the Grand Eunuch hastened to the women's apartments wherein Chti concealed her fears.

At the appearance of her terrible father-in-law advancing majestically towards her, Chti, panic-stricken, flung herself prostrate at his feet, and before he had even uttered a word, overwhelmed him with wails and supplications. In arrogant tones the Grand Eunuch prayed her to spare him her futile and fruitless appeals, and compelling her to rise, he demanded:

"Are you not ashamed, madam, to wear the detestable gifts which testify to your irreparable degradation?"

With a scornful gesture, he indicated the jewels, that Chti, in her fear and confusion, had forgotten to remove.

Hastily tearing off ring, bracelet and necklace, she threw them on the ground, simulating most saintly repulsion!

"You are a little too late, madam," was the Grand Eunuch's comment, as he calmly gathered up the jewels and slipped them into his pocket.

"These," he reflected, "will be some compensation

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for the loss of my handsome mule, of my wagon and of my ingot of gold."

Then, assuming a grave and judicial aspect:

"Your place, madam, is no longer in this respectable house. I behold myself compelled to have you returned to the home of your honorable parents!"

Chti heaved a deep sigh of relief; and already, according to her wont, she was beginning to hazard a grateful smile when the Grand Eunuch added ironically:

"You will be less shaken and more peaceful than in a mule wagon! . . ."

"How truly I appreciate your kindness," simpered Chti; "you are altogether too good!"

"Quite so," returned the pitiless Grand Eunuch, "and the porters shall have special orders not to jostle your coffin!"

At these words the lovely Chti became livid. Her arched eyebrows quivered despairingly above her convulsed eyes; a nervous tremor distorted the mouth whose kisses had formerly maddened the worthy Li Pi Tchou.

She stammered:

"My coffin, did you say?"

"Yes, madam," replied the Grand Eunuch pleasantly; "and it shall be a handsome one; it shall do honor to your rank . . . or rather, to mine!"

He added:

"Moreover, you are about to be most honorably

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beheaded by the hand of the Grand Executioner of the Violet Town!"

As Chti uttered a cry of terror, he concluded gallantly:

"Comfort yourself! . . . I give you my word that you will be able to appear without shame before your ancestors. Your head will be sewn on again!"

And he accompanied this concession with a courtly bow.

Meanwhile he had signed discreetly to the master craftsman, and as the lovely Chti, kneeling once more before him, had bowed her imploring head, the Grand Executioner had crept nearer to her on silent feet.

Seizing his sword in both hands he raised it above his head; and leaping in the air in order to acquire the needful impetus, he struck with lightning rapidity, uttering as he did so the traditional "Han."

The head of the lovely Chti rolled to the feet of the Grand Eunuch, who spurned it with disdain.

Quite unmoved, he gave orders that the head should be sewn on again, and that no time should be lost in placing the body in a coffin and conveying it decorously to the house of his honored in-laws.

Satisfied that he had taken steps to pacify the outraged spirits of his ancestors while cleansing the stain from his house, His Excellency Li Pi Siao returned to his son.

He was decidedly mollified and fanned himself with grace.

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Entering the room where he was anxiously awaited by Li Pi Tchou, he merely remarked:

“Our ancestors have been appeased!”

Li Pi Tchou immediately understood, and tears of sincere sorrow filled his eyes.

In his trouble he babbled heedlessly:

“What appalling haste!”

“You are right,” answered the Grand Eunuch satirically; “Life is soon over!” And turning abruptly on his heel he hurried away to the Violet Town, anxious to lose no time in gratifying his rancor towards those who had sullied the honor of his house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HIS EXCELLENCY LI PI SIAO was now obsessed by one pious preoccupation; that of completing the pacification of his ancestors, outraged in their family honor.

Certainly the decapitation of the lovely Chti had been a necessary act of justice; but it by no means sufficed to remove all stain.

It was needful to be revenged upon all those who had profaned the estimable name of Li.

The Grand Eunuch's first and simplest project, but by no means the best, had been to send against the Grand Tartar and the Khonghouses the armed forces of His Majesty the Holy Man.

Thanks to secret allies in the Grand Council, he had little trouble in persuading the Son of Heaven that the Grand Tartar was a rebel who betrayed his confidence instead of guarding his highways. A substratum of truth, moreover, lent weight to these accusations.

As for the Khonghouses, it was affirmed that their robberies laid waste the province.

It was furthermore made clear to the Son of Heaven that the entire credit for the expedition would be conceded to him by a grateful populace.

And the double enterprise was decreed.

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Two beplumed Manchu generals with the needful arrogance of bearing, mounted their horses one fine morning at the head of a numerous force of warriors whose long trumpets brayed forth their merits and their valor.

Magnificent standards displayed grimacing and horrible dragons and completed the subjugation of the idlers who collected to see the expedition set forth.

The military mandarins were perched like monkeys on horses with warlike accouterments. Their feet were thrust into large stirrups, and with their knees drawn up, their backs bowed and nodding heads they dozed already despite the blare of the trumpets! And yet the peacocks' feathers floating out behind their headdresses lent them a certain aspect of command, while the two swords slung at their belts attested their valor.

Behind them in confusion trotted a host of menials, ready to minister to their needs.

Finally, in magnificent disorder, came the horde of draggletail soldiers, hirsute and already spattered with mud. They were armed with sabers, with halberds, pikes and blunderbusses and uttered loud warcries calculated to terrify the foe.

From the ramparts of the Violet Town, Li Pi Tchou watched the departure of the troops that were to avenge him; he felt, however, small confidence in the masquerade.

And sure enough, no sooner were these gallant war-

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riors face to face with the resolute followers of the Grand Tartar, than their bombast deserted them as though by enchantment.

True, the dragon-bestrewn standards were waved threateningly while furious charges were sounded on the long trumpets and every conceivable weapon was brandished to the accompaniment of traditional warcries, including that of the tiger; but all these classical tactics failed miserably before the masterly strategy of the Grand Tartar who most skilfully turned the flank of the regular forces and subjected them to the murderous fire of modern rifles obtained from a pale-face Barbarian smuggler.

At the very first volley there was a general rout.

The Manchu generals and the military mandarins set spurs to their nags and fled before the enemy, leaving their standard-bearers, buglers, menials and all their troops to extricate themselves from the mêlée as best they might.

Towards nightfall, however, all these valiant troops found themselves reunited at a few lis from Peking. Reassured by the nearness of the high walls behind which they might take refuge in the event of a further attack, they paused to rest from their desperate flight.

In any case the Grand Tartar had not troubled to pursue them.

The expedition against the Khonghouses was not more fortunate. The brigands concealed in the thickets of the somber forest which harbored them, calmly

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opened fire upon the troops of His Majesty the Holy Man as soon as ever they approached the borders of the wood.

Enlightened during the battle with the Grand Tartar regarding the courage of their soldiers, the Manchu generals judged it useless to insist, and were thankful, without fighting at all this time, to be able to withdraw their troops in fairly good order towards Peking.

On the way there, they captured and beheaded all the tramps and beggars that they met, and their bleeding heads brandished on pikes lent a victorious aspect to their reentry into the town.

As a matter of fact it was quite true that such wastrels as they had immolated might easily, had they been allowed to live, have later reinforced the partisans of the Grand Tartar or those of the Khong-houses. This being so it was a comfort to have weakened the enemies' future forces.

When His Excellency Li Pi Siao learned from his secret service that the troops ordered to execute his vengeance had been Imperially routed, he was in no wise astonished.

Far from distressing himself, he determined in future to rely entirely on his own resources, confident that they would serve him better than any incompetent Manchu generals.

He reflected sensibly enough that if it was difficult to oppose adequate armed forces against a powerful fellow like the Grand Tartar, it was on the other

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hand easy enough to set a snare to his military vanity.

Li Pi Siao therefore published an Imperial edict which, recognizing the falsity of the accusations leveled against the Tartar, elevated him, by way of compensation, to the official rank of Grand Marshal.

The Grand Tartar accepted this occurrence as perfectly natural and in conformity with Chinese custom.

He concluded that His Majesty the Holy Man, whose troops he had so thoroughly trounced, was now naturally convinced of his merits and desirous of attaching so much valor to his personal service.

Accompanied by a brilliant escort, he therefore advanced jauntily towards the capital, and proudly entered the Violet Town to be officially invested with his new functions.

He was received with all the honors due to his recent promotion.

Warlike trumpets sounded on every side, rockets exploded in unison, and the personal guard of His Majesty the Holy Man, in battle array, nobly presented arms.

Intoxicated with pride and pleasure, the Grand Tartar, amid general enthusiasm, received the traditional headdress, decorated with peacocks' feathers and surmounted by a coral button. He was furthermore presented with a sword of honor and an official parchment confirming him in his new title.

He then received the hearty congratulations of innumerable military mandarins, including those whom

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he had vanquished. In point of fact, they being completely ignorant of the plot hatched by the Grand Eunuch, their compliments were perfectly sincere.

There ensued a great banquet, at which the new Marshal, occupying the seat of honor, displayed a vigor of appetite equal to that of his fists.

Scholars declaimed at tedious length the praises of the illustrious warrior and maintained an academic atmosphere despite the drunken brawling of the Grand Tartar's followers who were dutifully celebrating after their own fashion, the valor of their chief.

Disguised as a servant, the Grand Eunuch quietly assisted at this marvelous feast, being humbly assiduous in his services to the new Marshal.

Just as the banquet ended and as the noble warrior, in token of farewell, was about to partake of a cup of marvelously perfumed tea, Li Pi Siao, with amazing dexterity, added to it the contents of a tiny vial drawn from his ample sleeve.

The Grand Tartar unsuspectingly swallowed a portion of this mixture and replaced the cup upon the table with quiet dignity.

Night was approaching, and according to custom, no male other than the Son of Heaven might remain in the Forbidden City.

The Grand Tartar, therefore, still followed by his brilliant escort, set forth on his homeward journey.

Hardly, however, had he quitted the city when his

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companions beheld him writhe in the saddle as though seized with sudden dementia.

A few moments later, the new Marshal was seen to fall from his horse, and to the consternation of his escort he rolled upon the ground uttering terrible cries.

As though by chance, His Excellency the Grand Doctor of the Violet Town, well primed and bribed by Li Pi Siao, happened to pass that way.

That honest man, justly celebrated throughout the entire Celestial Empire, diagnosed a sudden attack of Asiatic cholera.

Shaking his head he added that the case was desperate, and indeed in a very few moments, the Grand Tartar confirmed his diagnosis.

A prey to horrible agony, he uttered a death rattle that contorted his purpling face, and breathed his last.

Distracted, his comrades sent for a handsome coffin wherein they laid the new Marshal with much pomp and bore him to his home. There remained to them as consolation the satisfaction of having seen their chief raised to the highest military honor !

Gratified at having so well accomplished his first vengeance, the Grand Eunuch now turned his attention to means whereby the Khonghouses should cruelly expiate the dishonor they had wrought to his house.

With these brigands, however, vanity was as un-

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likely to succeed as force. Cupidity alone was likely to ensnare them.

Li Pi Siao, whose imagination was extremely fertile, had little trouble in discovering a means of insuring the downfall of the Khonghouses.

He skilfully caused a rumor to be circulated that a convoy of camels laden with portions of the Imperial treasure was to be dispatched to a distant city threatened with famine.

This noble generosity on the part of the Son of Heaven failed to astonish those worthy folk who still believed that the supreme authority existed to assure their happiness, but it undeniably surprised the excellent Khonghouses, who at once determined to reap their profit from the event.

And since the convoy was actually to pass through their forest, they rejoiced to think that a profitable attack would entail very little exertion.

On a stated day, the convoy, accompanied by sham soldiers in the pay of Li Pi Siao, started on its journey.

It was of modest proportions, consisting of only three camels, but these camels staggered under stupendous loads.

Enormous cases, secured by ropes that passed between their two humps, endowed them with fabulous outlines. Camel-drivers, also in Li Pi Siao's pay, accompanied the beasts.

The cases were in fact stuffed with grapeshot which reposed amidst the finest gunpowder that Li

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Pi Siao had been able to procure, under pretext of replenishing the Imperial arsenal; but the populace outside the Forbidden City remained convinced that the cases were filled with bars of silver.

The journey was accomplished without incident as far as the forest which sheltered the Khonghouses.

By Imperial command the roads were thus far patrolled, but by a singular negligence nothing had been arranged for the further transit.

The special escort and the camel drivers entered the forest with a courage that astonished the soldiers who having so far protected them had now reached the limit of their operations.

They were, however, careful not to manifest any misplaced zeal, and contented themselves with wishing good luck to these courageous folk who did not fear an encounter with the Khonghouses.

As a matter of fact, the camel-drivers had scarcely advanced two lis into the forest when the expected encounter took place.

The Khonghouses, who were ambushed, broke from every thicket and bounded towards the coveted booty.

At this sight the mock soldiers turned and fled, uttering cries of terror; a proceeding which appeared quite normal to the Khonghouses who felt it useless to pursue these wretched military.

The camel-drivers, on the other hand, paused a moment in order to light the fuses skilfully concealed behind the cases with which they communicated; then they in turn took to their heels, followed

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only by the derisive hoots of the Khonghouses, who, led by their chief, flung themselves upon the three deserted camels.

At the moment when they were preparing to open the cases which they had so ardently coveted, a formidable explosion shook the earth and rent the atmosphere.

The marvelous spectacle was witnessed from afar by the servants of the Grand Eunuch.

In the midst of a column of smoke, of gravel and of clods of earth, the dismembered bodies of the Khonghouses executed a fantastic parabola, together with those of the three camels, and from the topmost branches of the trees like bleeding rags, hung remnants of camels and Khonghouses.

The worthy camel-drivers, having addressed a tender thought to their innocent animals thus sacrificed in a good cause, hastened, together with the mock soldiers, to retrace the road to Peking and to announce their success to their estimable master.

They were met on the way by persons who had been surprised to hear the distant explosion and who inquired what strange adventure had befallen them.

The camel-drivers replied gravely:

"Our camels have fortunately exploded!" An answer which did not fail to mystify the inquisitive.

However, the Grand Eunuch, highly gratified by the success of his scheme, had on this occasion no reason for concealing his authorship.

He therefore related the incident to His Majesty

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the Holy Man who, much delighted to know the countryside was delivered of the Khonghouses, compensated him for the loss of his three camels.

It was in any case a great economy compared with the cost of a further military expedition.

The real facts soon became known throughout the country, the peasants rejoiced at being delivered from the tyranny of the brigands and they showered blessings upon the name of the Grand Eunuch.

All the mandarins, even those of military rank, were forced to recognize his power.

He was, not without cause, regarded as more redoubtable than an entire army, and more intelligent than all the generals combined; not in itself perhaps a very great compliment.

But not a soul suspected that the Grand Eunuch had acted purely and simply with a view to conciliating the spirits of his ancestors.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

IN order to complete his honorable undertaking there remained but one task for the Grand Eunuch Li Pi Siao to accomplish, that of achieving revenge upon the Grand Prior "Profundity and Meditation" of the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds. This, however, was a very delicate affair.

His Holiness the Grand Prior was a much shrewder and more crafty proposition than a Grand Tartar or a common Khonghouse.

He was inaccessible to false vanity, and his love of this world's goods was allied to the wisest prudence. Also he was justly fearful of the Grand Eunuch's secret vengeance and mistrusted every one and everything!

It was not likely he would have imbibed a cup of harmful tea! He tried all his meat and drink on innocent bonzelings and, moreover, he himself overlooked their preparation.

As for employing force or violence where he was concerned, the Grand Eunuch dared not even consider it. It would have created too great a scandal in the neighborhood, even in the event of His Holiness the Grand Prior being quite modestly murdered!

As a matter of fact, since the edifying cremation of the good monk "Radiance and Felicity" before a

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wondering crowd, a great reputation for sanctity had attached to the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds, and His Holiness the Grand Prior had traded upon it in order to pass as a species of predestined Elect.

The least attempt upon his sacred person would have been regarded as an offense against Heaven, and the perpetrator of so sacrilegious an action would have been held responsible for any ensuing evils with which divine anger might visit the neighborhood.

Li Pi Siao fully realized the regrettable mental attitude of the entire population, and notwithstanding all his power, he did not dare to challenge it.

And moreover, was not His Holiness the Grand Prior still the uncle of the reigning favorite, Miss Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring, who, in a deplorable impulse of family loyalty, might easily in her turn demand vengeance of His Majesty the Holy Man!

Undoubtedly, Li Pi Siao might reasonably have despaired of ever making His Holiness the Grand Prior expiate his crime, but his resentment was too deeply ingrained to allow of his thus throwing up the game.

He continued to turn over sapient plans of vengeance. Finally after long reflection he determined upon that which struck him as being the most cruelly ironic.

Amongst those whom reason, self-interest or force had won to the Grand Eunuch's cause, Li Pi Siao had fortunately fully at his disposal the loveliest woman

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in Peking. She was quite unable to refuse him anything, not because she nourished an incongruous passion for a castrate, but because her life and reputation were entirely in his hands.

This youthful lady, who came of an illustrious Manchu family, being actually related to cousins of His Majesty the Holy Man, was the widow of a Tartar Grand Marshal.

She enjoyed universal esteem, a large fortune and a terrible secret malady!

All these things she had inherited from her excellent husband, who had, moreover, discreetly succumbed to the last of these possessions.

Her noble parents, who were ignorant of that particular detail and who, for reasons of ambition or intrigue, were desirous of establishing an influence in the Violet Town, had persuaded the young widow to conceal her history and to apply for the vacancy created by the decease of one of the eighty and one Imperial concubines.

And since the lady, in common with all ladies of high rank, had never appeared in public, and since her vicissitudes had been known only to her parents and to her husband, the swindle was an easy one. Also, as she was very young, amiable, well-educated and possessed of the loveliest little feet imaginable, and was moreover reputed to be as virginal as she was noble, she had considerable chances of success.

In point of fact the scheme came very near to triumphant accomplishment.

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At the first inspection, the Grand Eunuch Li Pi Siao, commissioned to select the new Imperial concubine, was the more willing to consider her claims in view of the influence exerted by her parents by means of offerings as discreet as they were generous, including gifts of rare delicacies.

Unfortunately for her, His Excellency the Grand Doctor in Chief of the Violet Town, despite his limitations, happened to possess a relatively profound knowledge regarding that which constituted his most important function.

He quickly discovered that the candidate was not a virgin; a fact which was in itself the highest of treasons; and he also ascertained the undeniable and still graver concomitant, a sinister diagnosis involving such punishments as his imagination refused to realize!

As a matter of fact, the poor lady, having always enjoyed rigorous seclusion and an innocent mind, was completely ignorant of the nature of the terrible illness from which she suffered.

She was, however, none the less liable, together with her relations to the twelfth degree, to be most legally condemned by the most indulgent and impartial of tribunals, and might be certain that after her nails had been extracted and her eyes put out, she would be tormented, crucified and finally cut into so many pieces that the Grand Doctor himself would be unable to accomplish their tally.

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Her entire family could also expect a similarly ignominious fate.

It was indeed the most unparalleled assault against the Son of Heaven known to human memory!

In the face of such an outrage the Grand Eunuch had remained perplexed; then, he had wisely decided that his simplest course was to draw from the situation the greatest possible profit.

Before the supplications of an entire panic-stricken family, he had consented to hold his tongue, but under severe conditions of which the mildest was the extortion of a veritable fortune, fragments of which, however, he wisely passed on to the Grand Doctor in earnest of discretion.

Possessing this redoubtable secret, he was naturally able to make use at will of that youthful lady who answered to the euphonious name of Ngia Chou, and she had already served him well on various occasions as a means of accomplishing elegant revenges.

The distinguished lady presented an instance of a curious phenomenon, she herself remaining relatively unaffected by her terrible affliction, while those on whom she bestowed it were reduced within six months to an almost indescribable condition.

Li Pi Siao therefore generously determined to lose no time in despatching this siren to the conquest of His Holiness the Grand Prior.

He secretly conveyed to her his orders, which as usual she had no choice but to obey.

She therefore set out one fine morning, in a chair

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securely closed against all glances, towards the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds.

Another litter containing the faithful eunuch who, disguised as a weighty merchant, was destined to play the part of a trustful husband who would facilitate her maneuvers, accompanied the wondrous Ngia Chou.

The journey was peacefully accomplished along roads which were now neither guarded by the Grand Tartar nor infested by the Khonghouses, and the two travelers arrived without mishap at the gates of the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds.

Descending from their chairs they mingled with the crowd of believers who now came daily on pilgrimage to the relics of the good monk "Radiance and Felicity."

They naturally began by fulfilling this pious duty and for that purpose sought the precincts of the Temple.

His Holiness the Grand Prior "Profundity and Meditation" was just then officiating with great pomp before the venerable reliques.

The fervor displayed by the lovely Ngia Chou in her acts of devotion, together with her remarkable beauty, attracted the attention of the celebrant. He began to hurry through his office in a manner which was the more unnecessary since Ngia Chou would gladly have awaited him through the entire day.

Accompanied by her mock husband she left the Temple with the leisureliness imposed on her by her

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admirable little broken feet, and tottering gracefully, sought the Gallery of Torments. There she feigned the deepest emotion at the sight of the painted wooden devils, who, with perennial zeal, continued to torture and carve their melancholy human prey.

Beside her the disguised eunuch assumed the silly expression of a worthy merchant sharing her horror and equally engrossed in contemplation of the torments.

His Holiness the Grand Prior who while ending his office had not lost sight of the couple, now approached the married pair on discreetly slippers feet, and saluting them with grave courtesy, found it easy to engage them in pious conversation.

The good merchant explained to His Holiness the Grand Prior that he had traveled from Peking, together with his wife, in order to accomplish a pilgrimage to a monastery whose holiness was now celebrated throughout the Middle Empire.

His Holiness the Grand Prior, doubtless blinded by the frantic passion which he had conceived for the exquisite Ngia Chou, was in no wise astonished by this flattering avowal.

In order to gain time wherein to feast his eyes on this enchanting example of youth and beauty, he began to describe at some length the edifying existence of the good monk "Radiance and Felicity."

And he strongly advised this pious and interesting couple to come often and pay their respects to the

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relics since the Heavens were openly favorable to all those who adopted this saintly practice.

Seized with a new and sudden zeal, the simple merchant then insisted upon an immediate return to the Temple, and announced his intention of praying there for at least two hours before the miraculous relics.

But Ngia Chou, doubtless out of a capriciousness permissible in a pretty woman, argued that such importunity might on the contrary result in wearying the Saint.

A pretended and courteous dispute ensued, in which His Holiness the Grand Prior thought it well to arbitrate. He decreed that in so sacred a spot, married people should demonstrate a mutual amiability and tolerance, and decided that while the husband would resume his devotions before the relics of the good monk "Radiance and Felicity," the exquisite Ngia Chou should visit the Menagerie of Monsters from which her spirit would derive equal edification.

The couple appeared to accept joyfully the solution offered by the eminent peacemaker; they accordingly parted and His Holiness the Grand Prior accompanied Ngia Chou to the Menagerie of Monsters.

At the first glimpse of them, however, she affected a lively repulsion, and turning away her head, simpered:

"Could not your Holiness be kind enough to show me something less horrible?"

Much distressed, His Holiness suggested to the

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gentle dame the innocent distraction of watching the many-hued waterfowl who swam beneath the windows of his private pavilion, on the bosom of a lake adorned with lotus-flowers.

Ngia Chou accepted with an infantile enthusiasm which ravished the fatherly heart of the good shepherd, and they directed their leisurely steps towards the magical lake.

On the way thither, His Holiness the Grand Prior overwhelmed the exquisite Ngia Chou with knowledgeable and admiring glances.

Undoubtedly in beauty, grace, elegance and distinction, she much surpassed the lovely Chti whose charms the gallant religious had found worthy of attention.

He kept repeating with rather foolish agitation:
“You will see what beautiful ducks I possess!”

But when they reached the banks of the lake he declared that they could be seen to greater advantage from his window and of this Ngia Chou naïvely allowed herself to be persuaded.

As soon as they entered the pavilion, however, Ngia Chou, obligingly forgetful of the ducks, began to expatiate on the beauties of the abode, adding thoughtlessly:

“But your Holiness must be very lonely!”

Meanwhile she assailed him with provocative and tender glances, simulating a turmoil of the senses which she appeared eager but quite unable to control.

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She sighed languorously and her lips as though against her will seemed to implore a kiss.

At this delicious sight His Holiness the Grand Prior "Profundity and Meditation" hesitated no longer; it became imperative to demonstrate his adequacy! . . .

Ngia Chou yielded without undue resistance; then she melted into tears:

"What have we done? . . . My poor husband! . . ."

"Calm yourself, madam," replied His Holiness the Grand Prior gently. "That worthy man is not to be pitied. He is acquiring Heaven's favor through his meditation before the relics of the good monk 'Radiance and Felicity.' "

And he made her promise to encourage her husband's perseverance in so pious and profitable a practice.

Ngia Chou was thinking inwardly:

"How much mistaken is this poor Superior in thinking himself so sagacious!"

But she kept her thoughts entirely to herself.

She continued to nestle amorously in the arms of His Holiness the Grand Prior, while dilating feverishly upon her overwhelming remorse, and in this manner she showed herself capable of outwitting him, which was by no means an easy matter.

During several days, the couple, who had with difficulty obtained lodgings among the numerous pil-

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grims who crowded the nearest village, continued to visit the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds.

The worthy merchant untiringly pursued his devotions, while his wife was no less faithful in seeking the little private pavilion where she was eagerly awaited by the now thoroughly enamored Grand Prior.

One fine morning, however, these honest folk disappeared without so much as taking leave, a circumstance which both surprised and saddened the worthy Superior; but upon the very same evening he received the consolation of establishing the undeniable certainty that the exquisite Ngia Chou had not flown without leaving him the deepest and most enduring remembrance of her charms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

WHEN His Excellency Li Pi Siao was informed of the overwhelming success of his hazardous enterprise, he rejoiced exceedingly.

In his delight he disguised himself and was carried to the house of the exquisite Ngia Chou, and after loading her with compliments and thanks he added enthusiastically:

"If you have your deserts you would be cured!"

Then he assured her that she had in future nothing to fear and could rely upon his eternal discretion.

Returning to the Violet Town he richly rewarded the worthy eunuch who had so adequately played the part of the mock husband.

Finally, as a perfect end to a perfect day, he sought his son Li Pi Tchou, who, completely healed and now entirely consoled regarding the disappearance of Chti, was patiently awaiting his official entry to the Violet Town.

The Grand Eunuch was gratified at discovering his son comfortably installed before a well-garnished table, for Li Pi Tchou was now all docility before the good counsels of his venerable father.

Li Pi Tchou rose to greet his sire but the Grand Eunuch, motioning him to resume his seat, joined him at the meal, and began to advise him judiciously

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regarding both the manner of preparing dishes and that of partaking thereof.

It was a subject dear to his heart and one on which he was well qualified to speak, and Li Pi Tchou, deeply interested, listened with respectful attention; he was beginning to realize that the art of cookery is of such importance that it is often a criterion of the civilization of a people.

Li Pi Siao bleated:

"Never forget, my son, that if it is needful for a true scholar to have knowledge of forty thousand characters, one must learn quite as many cookery recipes in order to be master of that art!"

And he admitted with contrition:

"I myself know only ten thousand!" Then, abandoning the enthralling subject, he continued:

"I shall have opportunities of instructing you further since you will soon have the honor of accompanying me into the Violet Town."

And he did not fail to add proudly:

"You will be able to enter it with uplifted head, under the approving regard of your ancestors whose outraged honor I have revenged together with your own."

Whereupon he expatiated complacently upon the ruses which he had employed in order to achieve his ends.

Li Pi Tchou almost swooned with pleasure when he heard of the fate that had overtaken His Holiness the Grand Prior "Profundity and Meditation," to-

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wards whom he nursed a legitimate rancor, not only for having humiliated and made game of him, but above all for having wished to roast him before a slow fire. He therefore found the narrative distinctly amusing and very much to his taste.

His admiration for the truly genial wit of his venerable father consequently exceeded all bounds.

Having thus assured himself that his son was really improving in every respect, the Grand Eunuch left him with the promise that he would shortly receive the recompense of his good conduct.

Indeed, a few days later Li Pi Tchou was pompously enthroned in his new situation.

The ceremony was of a peculiarly touching character.

His Excellency Li Pi Siao, in the presence of all the castrates, deferentially presented his son to His Majesty the Holy Man, who, in recompense of his Grand Eunuch's loyal services had deigned to honor the hall of reception with his presence.

Li Pi Tchou, holding in his hand the delicate little vessel, began the ritualistic prostrations.

At every three paces he carefully deposited his little vessel on the ground, and bowed himself to the earth, finally flattening his nose at His Majesty's very feet. Here he remained respectfully supine, holding his breath, but able to find distraction in contemplating the little vessel which he had placed between the Imperial slippers.

After a few moments, the Son of Heaven, having

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raised him graciously, bestowed upon him the official fly-whisk, the solemn attribute of his office.

He then exhorted him:

"I trust, sir, that you will worthily follow the example of your estimable father! . . . In order to do him honor I hereby appoint you First Chamberlain and Officer of the Saffron Gate. . . . Your chief duty will consist in presenting their fans to my eighty and one concubines!"

"Reverence to this!" murmured all the castrates in chorus, according to the immemorial custom which decrees that the use of this formula shall follow every utterance of the Holy Man.

And all those present abased themselves while the Son of Heaven took his majestic departure.

As soon as the Holy Man had withdrawn the Grand Eunuch addressed his son tenderly:

"Not only do I behold you created a mandarin of the third degree by the very fact of your being First Chamberlain to his Majesty, but you have also had the immense honor of being appointed Officer of the Saffron Gate! . . . Ah, my son, could you but realize the joy that pervades my paternal heart!"

Li Pi Tchou, moved to tears, knelt to express his heart-felt gratitude to so good a father.

The Grand Eunuch replied graciously, and added: "Let us now waste no more time!" And he invited his son, together with all the other castrates, to accompany him to the banqueting hall, where a rare feast of welcome awaited their consideration.

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"On this day," observed the Grand Eunuch, "it behooves us to partake of this banquet in a spirit of traditional gravity. Speeches of welcome will be recited, to which I shall certainly listen without impatience, since they are decreed by custom. But before long I shall hope to offer you another banquet calculated to erase any tedious memories!"

Whereupon he called on the senior castrate, who in treble accents began to declaim the obligatory compliments.

The Grand Eunuch murmured in his son's ear:

"This oration has no importance! . . . Do not let it distract you from a proper appreciation of my savory cooking!"

On the following day, Li Pi Tchou, clad in official robes, went solemnly at dawn to present their fans to the eighty and one concubines and in every instance he accompanied the presentation with the traditional phrase:

"This is a present offered you by the Holy Man in order that you may pass an agreeable day!"

In the evening he removed all the fans, observing:

"The solemn hour is at hand! One of you will be admitted to the immense honor of being allowed to kiss the slippers of the Holy Man, Son of Heaven."

"Reverence to this!" the concubines replied mechanically on hearing the august name of the Son of Heaven.

Apart from these important offices, Li Pi Tchou was free to wander at will within the Violet Town.

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The actual use he made of his liberty was literally to shadow his venerable father, firstly with a view to doing him every possible service, and secondly in order to study for that distant day when he must seek worthily to succeed him.

And thus the days passed pleasantly and peacefully for the Grand Eunuch and his son.

One morning, just as the moon was setting, the two castrates were slowly pacing the Great Red Vestibule prior to presenting to the Son of Heaven the official register wherein were recorded his nocturnal acts.

The Grand Eunuch lifted a bamboo blind adorned with pearls and precious stones, and drawing his son's attention to the borders of a well which was visible in the half-light of the gardens, he remarked cheerfully:

"To-morrow evening it is more than likely that the favorite who now enjoys a privileged contemplation of the Son of Heaven's august torpor will make an unpremeditated dive into the depths of that well!"

The astonished Li Pi Tchou turned an inquiring glance upon his venerable father, who continued:

"The present favorite is, as you know, Miss Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring, the affectionate niece of His Holiness the Grand Prior 'Profundity and Meditation.' . . . Yesterday in Grand Council I prepared the necessary decree regarding that personage and I am now about to present it to His Majesty for signature! . . . It is probable that Miss

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Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring will shortly have cause to appreciate the advantages of her family connections."

And the Grand Eunuch waved his fly-whisk with sarcastic emphasis.

Meanwhile the coming of dawn threw blood-red reflections on the pavements of the Great Red Vestibule, and the Grand Eunuch, leaving his son to his daily task of presenting the concubines with their fans, directed his steps towards the Imperial chamber.

While Miss Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring took her departure kneeling on the shoulders of a gigantic castrate, to whose pigtail she clung as a means of retaining her balance, the Grand Eunuch, without deigning to glance at her, advanced impassively towards the Son of Heaven.

Having performed the prescribed genuflexions and respectfully removed his spectacles, he presented the traditional register.

His Majesty, as usual, drew in the air with his sacred finger the characters which represent "Nil."

Having duly recorded these characters opposite the correct date, Li Pi Siao bleated humbly:

"Will your Majesty now permit me to present a little decree for your august signature!"

And he tendered the already prepared document.

The Son of Heaven deigned to reply:

"I authorize you to resume your spectacles in order to read me this decree!"

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Then, in the highest of treble accents, the Grand Eunuch began to read:

“On the third day of the tenth moon of the seventh year of his reign, His Majesty the Holy Man, Son of Heaven, decrees as follows to his loyal subjects for their enlightenment:

“Is declared unworthy of receiving the light of Heaven, His Holiness the Grand Prior “Profundity and Meditation” of the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds!

“This impostor has abused the public confidence, and unworthily assumed a renown for sanctity, while outrageously betraying his vow of chastity and dis-honoring his congregation by shameless assaults upon the persons of his female flock.

“Those who are inclined to doubt the Imperial word require only to visit the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds where they can ascertain that the very countenance of His Holiness the Grand Prior “Profundity and Meditation” is now as a just chastisement from Heaven become as that which is thrown to the swine to eat!

“Reverence to this!”

The Grand Eunuch, with respectfully lowered lids, awaited His Majesty’s approval.

“But this Grand Prior is an abomination!” cried the Holy Man, convinced of his Grand Eunuch’s sincerity, and knowing moreover that the latter would scarcely have jeopardized his situation and perhaps his life in order to deceive him.

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"It is indeed a very grievous scandal!" sighed the Grand Eunuch hypocritically.

The Holy Man continued:

"I will immediately send him a yellow silken bowstring." *

"It is hardly worth your Majesty's trouble," replied the Grand Eunuch disdainfully, being unwilling to forfeit the more refined vengeance of leaving His Holiness the Grand Prior "Profundity and Meditation" to complete his disintegration amid the jeers and contempt of his former flock.

He added with unction:

"It is with infinite regret that I am compelled to caution your Majesty that Miss Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring happens to be the niece of His Holiness the Grand Prior!"

The Holy Man was horror-struck!

It was true that the favorite had never done more than sniff the sacred slippers with ritualistic respect!

On the other hand, His Holiness the Grand Prior had acquired his terrible malady by his own action and not by heredity.

It was nevertheless supremely displeasing to His Majesty that the favorite should be possessed of such an uncle.

The relationship revolted him!

* NOTE: According to immemorial custom, he who receives the Imperial bowstring is constrained to despatch himself. Only persons of distinction being accorded this favor, if one may so term it, as an alternative to the ignominy of public execution.

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Therefore, raising towards Heaven the sacred index of his hand, he decreed quite simply:

“Let her vanish from the light of Heaven!”

“Reverence to this!” murmured the Grand Eunuch with a profound genuflexion.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE bonzes of Peking had officially decreed that this day was particularly auspicious and that the following night would display with unusual brilliance the conjunction of the literary planet with that of the Imperial House.

In connection with this remarkable conjunction they prophesied that the epoch would see the accomplishment of great events and would be eminently propitious to an august cohabitation that might herald the conception of a glorious scholar, a worthy successor to the throne!

The Son of Heaven attached but little importance to the divagations of these pious personages; but in deference to the holy traditions that ensured the quietude of his reign he decided that upon that night he would sleep officially with the Empress.

When night fell, all the castrates were at their posts ready to render due honors to the Sovereign during her transit from her private pavilion to that of the Son of Heaven.

The Grand Eunuch, in his robes of ceremony, brandishing his fly-whisk, preceded the magnificent litter of the Empress, crying in strident tones:

"Make way for the Divinely Beautiful who goes to be fructified by the Son of Heaven!"

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"Reverence to this!" cried in the shrill falsetto of ceremony all the other castrates who formed a guard of honor along the route.

This beautiful pageant was illumined by torches borne by little eunuchs whose treble voices mingled in the sacred songs of gladness.

Contrary to the custom that ruled in the case of a common concubine, His Majesty the Holy Man, instead of remaining placidly recumbent in his night-rail, contemplating the Heavens, stood in robes of ceremony upon the threshold of his chamber awaiting the Empress's arrival.

When she appeared, the Holy Man, while naturally preserving his serenity, vouchsafed with a magnificent and ritualistic gesture to direct her to his bed. Then, barely concealing the overwhelming boredom with which he shared in this official fête, he retired into the chamber, of which the Grand Eunuch solemnly closed the doors.

A melancholy silence soon descended upon the Imperial pavilion, which was guarded by eunuchs with drawn swords, awaiting the consummation of a great event.

But in happy contrast a lively animation reigned over the kitchens where a population of busy scullions crowded round the ovens preparing the second grand banquet that His Excellency Li Pi Siao was giving in honor of his son's reception into the Violet Town.

The earlier one had necessarily involved some degree of official gravity, whereas the second was

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destined exclusively to the final initiation of Li Pi Tchou into all those culinary enjoyments secured to him by his estimable office.

Therefore the pleasantest license in both words and actions was not only tolerated but encouraged.

Moreover, with a view to enlivening his guests, Li Pi Siao had as usual provided an orchestra and choir composed of little undersized eunuchs with crumpled faces. These played divinely upon the flute, and scraped harmonious sounds from the two strings of their drum-like snakeskin violins, and finally drew from their shriveled throats sounds of surprising shrillness.

It was to the accompaniment of their music that the neuter guests solemnly entered the banqueting hall.

They included the principal officers of the cohort, the Grand Doctor in Chief who had operated so skilfully on Li Pi Tchou and diagnosed the decease of the Grand Tartar, the excellent eunuch who had so gloriously hoaxed His Holiness the Grand Prior "Profundity and Meditation," and finally His Excellency the Grand Eunuch Li Pi Siao, followed by the High Officer of the Saffron Gate, his son.

From the very beginning of the repast, which started with a hundred hors-d'œuvre, one as delectable as another, the most cordial animation pervaded the distinguished assembly.

A delightful harmony of shrill exclamations,

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strident laughter and the squeaking of throaty voices mingled in a remarkable hubbub!

Ivory chopsticks, gummy with saliva, fluttered between the central erection of communal dishes from which they collected provender, and the greedy lips of the diners, while chuckles of satisfaction were punctuated by those eructations which the Chinese guest considers the highest expression of courtesy towards his host.

The young eunuch who had been so devoted a comrade to Li Pi Tchou, when the latter was herding the swine of His Holiness the Grand Prior, had been restored to favor by the Grand Eunuch. Li Pi Tchou, who was no ingrate, had interceded on his behalf, and the interesting young castrate had relinquished the care of the Holy Man's swine for that of his concubines.

In token of his repentance and of his gratitude, he had arrived at the Violet Town, carrying under his arm the plump sucking pig that he had so carefully fattened.

This estimable animal, roasted to a golden hue that almost suggested lacquer, now occupied a place of honor on the banqueting table, its snout adorned by a bouquet of scented flowers and its curly tail decorated with a rose-colored favor.

For Li Pi Siao was too perfect an epicure to neglect appearances.

Presently the ingenious castrate who had hoaxed His Holiness the Grand Prior was called upon by

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the Grand Eunuch to narrate the details of that joyous adventure, without however revealing the name of the lady involved.

He complied with so genial a wit that he drew tears of laughter from his audience.

He was succeeded by the Grand Doctor in Chief who entertained the guests with a full report upon the present condition of His Holiness the Grand Prior.

In less than four moons, the unhappy victim of the exquisite Ngia Chou had been smitten down with truly Asiatic rapidity, and had become an object too horrible to contemplate.

Ignominiously banished from the Monastery of the Celestial Clouds by the worthy and indignant monks, His Holiness the Grand Prior was reduced, amid hoots and jeers, to seeking his nourishment among the neighboring muck-heaps wherein he wallowed like a great hog in its own midden.

At this charming description there was a general roar of laughter, and the Grand Eunuch observed to his son:

"What a terrific thing is love! . . . Behold where it has led a Grand Prior! . . . Such are the consequences of an absurd indulgence, whereas the pleasures of the table, enjoyed even to excess, expose you to no graver risk than that of a mild attack of indigestion with which our friend the Grand Doctor in Chief is well qualified to deal."

And he repeated sapiently:

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"What a contrast and how vastly instructive!"

Whereupon the Grand Eunuch was moved to enlarge upon the theme of love. He instanced the religious beliefs that advocate chastity as pleasing to Heavens, the philosophers, thinkers and scholars who, seeking their mental power in austere celibacy, assure the quietude of their lives by the absence of a stupid, peevish and jealous companion.

Then he spoke with contempt of the pale-face Barbarians who demean themselves to the degree of actually sharing their table with their horrible women-kind!

This statement was so astounding that a murmur of incredulity ran round the audience.

But the Grand Eunuch repeated his affirmation and further emphasized it:

"Their females enjoy privileges almost equal to those of the males; they enter impudently into every conversation, freely discussing family and practical affairs. Some of them even go so far as to lift their voices in public places where they are permitted to wander unaccompanied in the most unseemly manner. . . . Neglecting their houses, the more shameless among them actually meddle in national affairs as though they were officials! . . .

"Is it therefore surprising that the Barbarians under such detestable conditions spend their time in mutual abuse and the most cruel warfare?"

Then with an air of profound conviction, the Grand

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Eunuch, as though inspired by Heaven, was moved to prophesy:

"If ill-fortune should decree that China should have no more eunuchs, she would be menaced by a similar catastrophe! Taking advantage of their liberty, the women, instead of remaining decently in the home, would overrun the streets preaching revolution; the more brazen among them would tear the bandages from their feet and contrive to walk in a natural manner! Horrible crimes would then bathe China in blood! The throne of the Holy Man would crumble into the abyss, and Heaven, justly offended, would let loose plague and cholera upon a Chinese people plunged in savage civil warfare." *

Observing that emotion was gaining on his hearers, the Grand Eunuch paused:

"I crave your pardon and should upbraid myself. This banquet must not be marred by melancholy!"

And passing to lighter topics he once more began to jest.

Then His Highness the Grand Officer of the Saffron Gate, jealous no doubt of the paternal eloquence, rose to address the guests:

"My dear comrades," he began, "I have thought it wise since I have had the honor of being admitted to your esteemed brotherhood, to confide to you the history of my past misfortunes. . . . You know how, maddened by a detestable passion, I nearly compro-

* Strange to say, the above prophecies have been fulfilled since 1912.

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mised my entire future; how grievously I sinned against filial obedience, and what was my well-merited punishment. . . . I owed you such confession as a debt of honor to my distinguished father. . . . Well, I now assure you yet again: When a scholar of my education foolishly rejects the counsels of his venerable sire and refuses to become an honorable official; when he despises honors, fortune and the certainty of a comfortable and secluded old age in official dignity; when he rejects all these in the vain hope of enjoying his independence and his virility, he must expect to undergo every kind of misfortune. . . . Spurned by his family, disdained by the populace and ridiculed by all, he drags out a miserable and hazardous existence. . . . He is justly exposed to endure the violence of Tartars and Khonghouses, and must consider himself fortunate if the bonzes do not, for the purification of his despicable spirit, roast him alive as a salutary lesson to those who might wish to emulate his shameless example. . . . For, in a real civilization, be it understood, there is no room for scholars who desire, in a reprehensible spirit of independence, to stray from the customary path trodden by their ancestors!"

While Li Pi Tchou developed this most futile discourse, the banquet was proceeding happily, and succulent dishes succeeded each other upon the table.

Zealous attendants had finally placed beneath the quivering nose of His Excellency the Grand Eunuch

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Li Pi Siao a delicate jelly of rotten eggs that were undoubtedly quite ten years of age. For some moments Li Pi Siao inhaled with enjoyment the odors that rose from this confection, then, as he began to partake of this favorite dish, he remarked cheerily to his son:

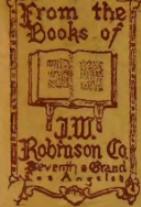
“Believe me, you have talked quite enough! . . . Why not sample this delicious jelly instead of seeking to evoke such melancholy recollections? . . . All is for the best in this best of all possible worlds, now that you have agreed that wisdom lies, after a certain age, in replacing the futile pleasures of love by the more solid enjoyments afforded by a well-garnished official table.”

Then he added courteously:

“Later on we will go and see Miss Smile-of-a-Rose-at-the-Dawning-of-Spring, the estimable niece of His Holiness the Grand Prior ‘Profundity and Meditation’ flung into the depths of an accommodating well; this agreeable spectacle will distract our minds and conduce to peaceful and satisfactory digestion!”

“Reverence to this!” came in unanimous and deafening response from the joyous chorus of the castrates in their shrillest falsetto accents! . . . And the little eunuchs provided a melodious accompaniment upon their flutes and violins! . . .

THE END



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